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January 13, 1885.

Vol. XV.

Single
Number.

PUBLISHED WEEKLY BY BEADLE AND ADAMS,
No. 98 WILLIAM STREET, NEW YORK.

Price,
5 Cents.

No. 390.



CHAPTER I.

A VICTORY WHICH MAY CAUSE TROUBLE.

THERE were signs of an unusual excitement at Lower Pocket, Idaho, and men were gathered about the streets in groups, talking in voices earnest but low, as though some important event was about to occur.

Lower Pocket was a mining-town, but the various trades were so well represented that the picturesque miner stood shoulder to shoulder with the carpenter, the blacksmith, the clerk and the white-handed men who obtained a living in various ways otherwise than manual.

All these men were looking in one direction—toward the west. They had been looking thus for hours, but their earnest waiting suddenly changed to open excitement.

"There he is!" cried a dozen voices. "There he comes!"

"It may be some one else," said a doubtful voice.

"I'll bet a handful o' gold-dust it's him!" said a big miner, loudly. "Who takes me?"

Nobody volunteered to "take" him.
 "I'll go ye another," the man continued.
 "Same wager ag'in' even money that Lower Pocket wins ther raffle."
 No one answered.
 "Who takes me?" he cried.
 Still no reply.
 "Durn my buckskins, ef this ain't a keeful crowd, my name ain't Zeke Zanel!"
 "Do you expect us to bet against our own town?"

It was a quiet voice which asked the question, and Zane looked down from his towering height and saw a youth of about eighteen years. The manner of this young man was as quiet as his voice, but he had a bold, manly face, nevertheless, and seemed to be one who, in the language of the West, had plenty of "sand."

"Oh, it's you, is it, Jaguar Joe? Wal, o' course I don't expect you ter bet ag'in' Lower Pocket. O' course not, seein' you're ter handle ther strings if we git ther prize."

Then the big miner forgot to talk as he watched the horseman who came rapidly forward, and an expectant hush fell over the crowd.

The rider came dashing down with the vim of a true Western man, but not a word did he speak, nor sign did he make, until his horse's feet flung the turf almost in the faces of the foremost men.

Then he reined in his horse and removed his hat.

"Gents," he announced, "I am happy to inform yot that Lower Pocket has got the Barrel Gulch post-office."

Then it seemed as though the waiting men had gone insane. They yelled, they flung their hats high in the air, they danced, they shook hands, and their ringing cheers would have "startled the wood-birds," according to the old expression, had there been any woods or any birds in the immediate vicinity.

What meant all this uproar?

We will explain.

Barrel Gulch was a depression in Gold-padded Hills, Idaho. When gold was discovered at the place, a village sprung up at the upper end of the gulch. Later some of the miners built their cabins at the lower end, and two villages were thus started, with half a mile of sterile, sandy land between.

At first the two camps seemed as one and there was good feeling between all the settlers, but as new-comers flocked in and the population increased, a spirit of rivalry arose between the two. Each tried to outstrip the other; each wanted all the honors; each was anxious to be the center of the great city they felt sure would some time be located in Barrel Gulch.

They did grow prosperous, stores, hotels and the like sprung up, and they began to be talked of outside their own narrow limits. And for every step they grew in this way, the bitterness between them grew half a dozen. Strong was the hatred, many the feuds, frequent the open collisions, and loud the talk their rivalry brought about.

The climax came when it became known that a government post-office was to be established at one of the two. Which? That was the question which shook Barrel Gulch from end to end. Then the battle commenced. Innumerable petitions were signed, men journeyed here and there, resolutions were passed, speeches made, and Barrel Gulch fought wildly.

Each village felt sure that whichever secured the post-office would secure the coming great city, and, forgetting that a great city would inevitably overrun all the half-mile of land between them, each resolved to win the prize.

And now it was definitely known that Lower Pocket had won, and its citizens went almost wild with joy.

Young Joseph Leonard, *alias* Jaguar Joe, was among the most pleased, for he had been promised the position of driver on the stage to be run to Mountain Gap, if the lower village won.

Young as he was, he had seen a good deal of life in the West. His father had been a stage-driver in Colorado, years before, and the boy had taken lessons on the box when he was a mere child. Naturally, he went into the business, himself, when old enough, and had driven two years in Arizona before coming to Idaho.

Now, it seemed definitely settled that he was to mount the box again.

That evening saw a great difference in the two villages. Lower Pocket was triumphant, and noise enough was made there for a Fourth of July celebration, but Upper Pocket was very quiet, and many of the houses showed no light.

Upper Pocket had met with a cold day.

Probably all the citizens of the lower village

took part in the festivities except one. This one was Jaguar Joe. Shortly after dark he went to his quarters, made himself as neat as possible, and walked up the gulch.

As he went he could not but notice the difference in the two places, and he shook his head slightly.

"I'm afraid trouble will come of it!" he muttered.

It was no wild prediction. He knew just how bitter the rivalry was, and when he thought that Upper Pocket might seek revenge for its defeat, he was only judging the wild, rough-and-ready men as he found them.

His thoughts soon turned into another channel, however, and he quickened his pace and soon arrived at Upper Pocket. He moved without any appearance of skulking, yet with a desire to avoid observation. He had a suspicion that the men of the village might not deal gently with the future driver of the Mountain Gap stage, so it was just as well to avoid them.

This he easily did, for no one seemed astir in the part of the village he wished to visit.

He soon neared a small house, from the nearest window of which shone a light. He approached and looked somewhat cautiously inside. One person only was visible; a slight, girlish form, of which it was hard to tell more because she was seated at a table with her face buried in her hands.

Advancing to the door, he knocked. There was a quick stir inside, and then it was opened and the girl stood before him—a very pretty girl of a little less than his own age, brown-haired, brown-eyed, and charming in every way, yet on this occasion singularly pale.

Joe started as he saw her.

"What's the matter, Roema?" he quickly asked.

"The matter? Nothing," she answered, giving him her hand, and smiling faintly; the ghost of a smile.

"But you are as white as your collar, nearly."

"That's nothing, Joseph. Come in, at once; I'm not sure it is safe for you to be seen here."

"Why not?"

"Upper Pocket is very bitter against all from the lower village, since the news came."

"Naturally."

"Perhaps you'd think it natural if they should resort to blows and weapons, but it makes me shiver," said Roema, as she lowered the curtain, thus screening them from prying eyes. "But, Joe, I'm so glad the lower village has won. You'll be the stage-driver, now, won't you? It'll be splendid!"

She showed considerable signs of enthusiasm, now, and Joe laughed lightly.

"I suppose I shall, but I won't be proud," he replied. "I'll carry the mighty honors of the position modestly, only exulting because it will bring me in the money I want to lay by before I build a house for myself and—one Miss Roema Albert!"

The girl boxed his ears playfully, with which episode we have nothing to do, as it was of interest only to those concerned in the affair. Conversation then ran for awhile on the victory of Lower Pocket, and while they talk we will say a word about Roema.

She was the daughter of Abe Albert, the keeper of the "Take Something" saloon. This was a rough-and-tumble place, frequented by the worst of Upper Pocket's people, and Albert was no better than his customers. In fact, it had more than once been suggested that he be "run out of town," but he used money freely for Upper Pocket's gain, and that covers a host of crimes.

Abe frowned on the intimacy between Roema and Joe, whom he pronounced a milk-sop, and favored one Pete Clayton, whom he wanted for a son-in-law and partner, in one.

Jaguar Joe had never been ordered to keep away from the house, for Albert had an idea that that was not the way to manage Roema, and he knew Joe would not do such a foolish thing as to marry at his age. In three years, Albert thought, Roema would forget her fancy for him and like Clayton.

Yet, the girl had reason to believe that if her father knew Joe was there that night, trouble would follow, and that was why she drew the curtain and, as they talked, listened to every sound with a dread new to her.

CHAPTER II.

THE BLOOD-STAINED HAT.

DESPITE a slight nervousness apparent in her manner, Jaguar Joe could find no fault with Roema's conduct, but he did not forget the pallor he had seen on her face when he arrived.

He soon referred to it again and asked for an explanation, but the girl tried to evade the subject and seemed decidedly ill at ease.

"Of course I don't want to annoy you," he then said, "but it is very plain that something has gone wrong, and if I go away without knowing what it is, I shall be worrying about you. Still, if it's a private affair, don't let me intrude."

"I want to tell you, but am afraid," she acknowledged.

"Of what?"

"Perhaps not afraid, but I don't know as I ought to tell!" she added, more vigorously; then, with a face which grew pitifully troubled: "I am wretched—miserable."

The declaration was enough to thoroughly arouse Jaguar Joe, for his affection for her was earnest, and he urged her to tell him the whole story. And after some further hesitation she did speak freely.

"Last night," she began, "I had just finished my work after supper when there was a knock at the door. I at once opened it, and saw a man who was a stranger to me. I am sure he had never been in Upper Pocket before. He was middle-aged and heavily-built, with thick side-whiskers and a general look which reminded me of English Jack, the carpenter, except that he had a very honest face. What I mean is, that he looked like an Englishman, if English Jack does."

"Jack is English, through and through," said Joe.

"That was my idea. Well, I waited for this stranger to speak, but he stood staring at me in a fixed way which made me think he was crazy, and I was on the point of shutting the door in his face when he seemed to suddenly recover his presence of mind."

"He begged my pardon, and then asked if Mr. Albert was in. I told him father was at the saloon, and would be there until ten o'clock. For this information he thanked me, and then, looking at me curiously, observed that he did not know Mr. Albert had a daughter. He seemed to know father, so I answered him civilly. He asked the name of my mother, and other questions of me, but as father has never told me anything about that part of my life which I cannot remember, I could tell him but little."

"He abandoned questioning after awhile and went away, but when he was gone the recollection of how he had persistently looked at me remained in my mind, and I must say I thought it very odd. I thought a good deal about him, wondering why he was so interested, and why, if he was an old family friend, or anything of that kind, he had not said as much."

"I retired at the usual hour, and half an hour later father came in. He was not alone. I heard him talking with some one, and the other voice I recognized as that of the stranger. They were still in the kitchen when I fell asleep, and I heard no more during the night."

"In the morning I expected to find the stranger here, but father was alone, and he said nothing about him. So I asked where he was. Father looked very queer, at first, as though he was frightened, and then asked what I knew about the man. I told him, and then he said the stranger was only a tramp, and he commented angrily on his asking me questions. When he said he had never seen the man before, I asked why he had brought him home. Then he denied having done so, said I had dreamed it all, and angrily told me to drop the subject."

"Singular as it seems, I obeyed, but, in moving about the room, I noticed a peculiar, dark stain on the floor which I had never seen before. I was getting ready to try to rub it out when father angrily told me to let it alone, saying it was oil he had spilled there. I obeyed for the time, but, when he was gone, I tried to scrub it away. I failed, and the spot is still there, as you can see. But I don't think it's oil."

Joe was looking at the stain she had pointed out, and there was suspicion expressed on his own face. As Roema paused, he slowly asked:

"What do you think it is?"

"I don't dare to guess," she answered, shivering. "But hear the rest of my story and judge for yourself. A little later, when in the store-room, I found, wedged in between two boxes, a hat which I am almost willing to swear was the stranger's. It was of a style seldom seen in the West, and I noticed it in particular when he was here. I will show it to you."

She left the room, but soon returned with what had once been a tall, gray hat. Now, however, it was a good deal out of shape, one side being crushed in, and as Joe took it from her he noticed a dark, red stain just below the damaged part.

He looked from the hat to Roema. She was paler than before, and she shivered when she met his gaze.

"You think this is the Englishman's hat?" he questioned.

"I feel sure it is."

Joe half-unconsciously glanced from the stain on the hat to the stain on the floor.

"You, too, connect them," said Roema, quickly.

"Tell me plainly what you suspect," Joe advised.

"You know as well as I. To me, it looks as though the hat had been crushed by a heavy blow, and then there are the two blood-stains. Further, father denies all knowledge of the man; he says the stranger did not come home with him, when I am sure he did. Again, I have learned that the man is not at the hotel. Now, you know what I fear; terrible as is the imputation, I am forced to believe there has been a terrible deed done here."

Jaguar Joe did not find it hard to believe it. He knew Abe Albert well enough to be ready to believe anything about him, though, for Roema's sake, he was sorry to be obliged to believe.

Circumstances were suspicious, however, and as the girl had said, the hat looked as though it had been crushed in by a heavy blow. What was more likely than that the same blow had drawn the material for the red stains from the Englishman's veins?

"Is there nothing else in the store-room?" Joe asked.

"Nothing. I have searched carefully, but there is nothing there. Perhaps you had better look, though."

Joe did look, but he found nothing more than she had done, nor did other parts of the house reveal more.

Roema did not ask Joe's advice, nor did he give any. If Abe Albert had killed the Englishman, his daughter certainly had no wish to prove the fact and reveal it to the world. Neither did Joe desire to investigate the matter. Crime should be revealed and punished—but was not Albert the father of Roema?

The girl explained that her motive in speaking about the matter was to ease her mind of a ghastly secret. She had thought about it until her brain reeled, and she felt that in Joe she could find a sympathizer and confidant who would not betray the trust.

It was a painful subject to discuss, and they finally abandoned it by mutual consent. They spoke of the future; of Lower Pocket's triumph; of Jaguar Joe's success in getting the Mountain Gap stage, and of other matters which had a cheerful nature.

They were still talking when footsteps sounded outside the door and a hand was laid on the latch. Roema started up with a startled expression. It was an hour earlier than her father's usual time for returning, but her fears suggested that it was he, and she feared the consequences of his meeting Joe.

The door opened.

Abe Albert crossed the threshold.

There he paused, looking at Joe in surprise, while a second figure appeared beside him. Roema's alarm was not lessened as she recognized Pete Clayton, the young man the saloon-keeper had selected for her husband.

Clayton, thus revealed by the lamp-light, was seen to be a stout young fellow of about twenty years, but although his form was good, his face was bad. It was coarse, low and brutal, and he looked a fit friend for tough Abe Albert.

The latter's expression changed to one of anger as he fully realized the situation.

"Hullo, you!" he harshly exclaimed, addressing Joe; "what ther blazes be you doin' hyar?"

Joe had good control of himself, and he moderately replied:

"I merely dropped in for a short call, Mr. Albert."

"Wal, you kin drop out for a long stay-away, my young cove!" was the retort. "I don't a'prove o' boys a-hangin' 'round my house in this way."

"I beg your pardon, sir, but I do not see why you should be offended," and Joe's voice was still pacific.

"Wal, I see, an' that's enough. You may be a sweet-scented daisy at ther Lower Pocket, but you're a durned nuisance hyar."

"Yas, an' I stand ready ter thump ther man who comes up hyar to crow over Lower Pocket's snide victory," added Pete Clayton, belligerently.

Joe saw that both men had been drinking, and

though their manner was very offensive, he knew the easiest way was the best.

"I have not come for any such purpose as you say," he began, pleasantly, but Pete interrupted him.

"It don't make no diff'rence why you're hyar, but you're ther banty that's got ther Mountain Gap stage, an' I'll show ther Lower Pocket that ef ther durned vehicle goes through, it'll take more'n you ter drive it. Upper Pocket hez a debt ag'in' you, my dandy, an' I'm goin' ter square it right hyar. I'll punch a hole in yer cranium that'll make it fit fur an election ballot-box. Durn ye, come hyar an' be thrashed!"

CHAPTER III.

A HISTORICAL CHARACTER APPEARS.

AS Clayton spoke he flourished his fist to a degree which was grotesque, but the fact remained that he meant mischief, and was enough of a ruffian for anything.

Roema, very much alarmed, remained in her chair, pale and speechless, but Jaguar Joe did not lose his self-possession, even when Abe Albert added his voice to Pete's loud threats. Our young friend had seen but eighteen years of life, but they had been of a kind which had made a practical man of him, and one who had fought the Apaches of the Arizona trails was not likely to tremble easily.

"I see no occasion for having any trouble," he observed. "I am ready to go home, and as I am not in favor of war, I'll walk out peacefully, if you please."

He started to do so, but Pete barred his way. "No, sirree!" he exclaimed. "You ain't goin' till I put ther map o' Africa on ye with in-devilish ink. Hyar's at ye!"

The young rough sent out his fist, strong in the belief that it would send Jaguar Joe flying about like a top, but the latter coolly "ducked" his head and escaped the blow. At the same time he made an effort to dodge under Pete's arm; an attempt which would have succeeded had not Albert thrust out his foot and tripped him.

He fell to his knees, and in a moment more, while Roema cried out in terror, Clayton had him by the collar.

"Now, durn ye, I'll wipe ther floor all up with ye!" howled the ruffian—but he made a mistake.

Jaguar Joe saw that there was no escaping the fight, and he knew that a good start is a race half-won. Without trying to rise, he caught Pete by the legs, put out all his strength, and then flung him to one side as though he had been a mere child.

The fellow struck against a chair and fell over upon it, breaking it in pieces, and bringing a roar from Albert. He tried to seize Joe and failed, and the latter escaped to the door. He did not intend to run away like a frightened coyote, however, and he turned there.

"Mr. Albert," he said, "I very much regret that this scene has occurred, but I beg you to bear witness that Clayton forced it upon me."

"An' I ain't done yit!" declared that person, rushing forward, his nose showing a suspicious red, but his brute courage as good as ever.

Jaguar Joe had borne all he could, and, this time, he did not try to avoid his persecutor. Keeping his place he sharply ordered him once to keep back, but, as the order was disobeyed and Pete put up his big fists again, Joe shot his own clinched hand forward between them—and Pete went down again.

He fell with a crash, and, though he stirred enough to show that he was not senseless, he lay where he had fallen.

Abe Albert was as still as he, as he stood staring at the fallen bully blankly.

"I'm going now," continued Joe, remarkably cool after his battle. "I hope you won't lay this up against me, Mr. Albert, for no one can be sorrier than I that it's occurred."

The saloon-keeper did not stir, or seem to notice him, and as Joe thought it best to let the matter settle itself, so far as was possible, he made a farewell gesture to Roema and went away.

He was not pursued, and he had no trouble in returning to Lower Pocket.

When he arrived he was not in any mood to join in the jollification, however, for he felt sure he had innocently outlawed himself from Albert's cabin, and there was no knowing when he would see Roema again. This was a gloomy thought.

His private affairs did not keep his mind wholly from what Roema had told him though, and much he wondered about the blood-stained hat and the Englishman. Who was the latter?

Why was he at Barrel Gulch? What had become of him?

The last inquiry seemed the easiest of all to answer. That he had been killed and his body secreted was only according to Abe Albert's reputation.

But why had the latter put him out of the way? Why had the man looked at Roema so strangely?

These questions hovered in Jaguar Joe's mind until he fell asleep.

The Mountain Gap and Barrel Gulch Stage-Line was formally opened, and it was Joe Leonard who piloted the four fine bay horses that drew the new stage. During the first three days there were passengers enough, for some of the leading men of Lower Pocket went along. Their ostensible object was to open the line in grand style, but those in the secret knew that it was commonly expected that Upper Pocket would show its teeth, and it was deemed best for Joe to have a guard.

Three days passed, however, and Upper Pocket made no demonstration, and it was agreed that it would be foolish to keep it up. If the rival town meant mischief, its people were shrewd enough to bide their time.

That they would try some game, more or less lawless, Jaguar Joe never doubted, but he remained the coolest person at Barrel Gulch and handled the ribbons over his blood-bays as though all the world was a bower of peace.

When he was informed that he would be allowed to go alone on the fourth day, he quietly answered:

"All right, gents; the only difference it'll make will be that I'll take a few extra cartridges along."

Upon which they nodded, and observed:

"The stage will go through with him on the box, unless lightning catches him on ther hip."

Joe had not been to Upper Pocket since his trouble there, nor had he seen any of the participants in that scene; but Roema had managed to drop him a note, and he knew everything was as usual, so far as she was concerned.

Leaving his friends he walked on through the village, having no object in view except to get the air. He was in a thoughtful mood, and found himself beyond the collection of houses before he realized it. When he regained his usual state he turned about, but as he did so he came suddenly face to face with another person.

The encounter was so unexpected that his hand mechanically sought his revolver, but it dropped to his side as he saw that the person was a woman. Just how she looked he could not tell, for the night was dark, but he judged she was a stranger to him, and her appearance seemed to partake of the odd and grotesque.

"Hullo!" she said, in a wheezy voice.

"Hullo!" Joe returned, mechanically.

"Don't you know you're in danger here?"

"Danger? No, I wasn't aware of it."

"Well, I advise you not to go rambling around by night."

"You do, eh?" said Joe, looking at her sharply. "May I ask why? I have always considered myself capable of looking out for Number One, but the biggest tree gets the most wind, and I'm liable to blow over. Just mention the trouble and I'll feel grateful."

Joe suspected that a joke was being played upon him. He even suspected that this seeming woman was a man, and that the boys were trying to scare him. Her wheezy voice and odd attire, which seemed mostly bonnet and cloak, were new to Lower Pocket.

"Ain't it enough that you're in danger?" she demanded, sharply.

"It's better than to have the danger fall, and that's why I want a bill of particulars. That'll help me to dodge the shell before it bu'sts, as 'twere."

"Don't you believe me?"

"Did I say I didn't?"

"No, but you're laughing at me."

"Well, that's because I suspect you are on the joke. If not, I'm ready for business. Heave ahead, and I'll hear what you have to say."

"You're a light-headed young rascal, but I'll say that you are safer in-doors than out. There are those who don't like you well enough to hug you."

"That's all right, for when I do any embracing I like to choose the other party," said Joe, considerably amused. "But who are you, and what the dickens are you driving at?"

"I'm Mother Hubbard."

"The lady who went to the cupboard, or the originator of the latest style of dress?"

The woman stamped angrily on the ground.

"That'll do for cheap talk. Now let us talk business. Perhaps you think you have no enemies. Allow me to say the driver of the Mountain Gap stage can't be so lucky, anyhow. Besides, you have other enemies."

"Who?"

"Ask Roema Albert."

Jaguar Joe started.

"What about her?"

"Just this: When you looked at her you made enemies, and they won't forget you right quick. You'd better both of you look a little out."

"What do you know about it?"

"Just what I say, or I shouldn't say anything. You don't catch Mother Hubbard far off her base."

"Look here, woman," said Jaguar Joe, with increasing interest, "why will you persist in mixing tragedy and comedy? If you know what you pretend, come down to the facts of the case and prove it."

"The law don't say I shall prove it, and I sha'n't do it. I'm a free-born American citizen, entitled to vote and wear a Derby hat, and I don't allow any centipedes to crawl on my moccasins. You hear that, young man?"

"Yes, I hear it, and I'm convinced that you're crazy. You don't talk sense. Better go and get yourself locked up. As for your warning, I reckon it don't amount to the perfume of an ox-eyed daisy."

"You're another!" retorted Mother Hubbard, flourishing a stick. "If you've read the catechism with due zeal you know what becomes of unbelievers; if you don't, I don't mind saying that they get throwed cold. You'll find it out before your back-hair turns gray!"

CHAPTER IV.

AN OMINOUS LETTER.

JAGUAR JOE was fully convinced that he was talking with a woman who was mentally deranged. Her wild, fantastic and absurd dress was bad enough, while the way in which she sawed the air with her stick, together with her peculiar language, seemed to settle the matter decisively.

He therefore decided to make no more idle talk with her, but to talk soothingly and get her back to wherever she lived, if possible.

He tried to carry out this plan, but she at once seemed to understand it.

"Now, you let me alone and attend to your own affairs. You need to. Don't you get any false doctrine into your head and think I'm to be laughed at. I'm not. I know whereof I speak, and I say to you again that you'd better look a little out. You're a marked man. The red slayer is on the roof, and don't you forget it. I'll drop in on Roema and tell her as much. You two had better go slow, or the daisies will have a picnic over your mound next year. Put that in your pipe and smoke it!"

Mother Hubbard made a thrust with her stick at the youth, and he was obliged to do some gymnastic work to avoid it.

"That's all right," he said, "but, see here—who are you, anyhow?"

"I'm Mother Hubbard, a woman of mystery. I'm no more to be read than the sphinx. Not any. I'm a portable conundrum, with all modern improvements. That's all you need to know. Only let me once more say that you're in danger. Keep your eyes open. I'm going now. *Vale!*"

She turned at the last words and was hurrying away, but Joe was not inclined to let her go thus, and he made one more effort to either make her speak plainly or to discover who she was.

The attempt was a failure. "Mother Hubbard" would not talk, and she kept her face resolutely concealed. He would not have persisted so long only, in spite of her absurd talk, the idea was strong in his mind that there was method in what she was saying.

Whether she had good reason for what she said, or whether her object was to frighten him was what he vainly wished to know.

When satisfied that he could do no good by talking, he consented to let her go. She speedily disappeared in the darkness, going in the direction of the village, and as the boy's desire for a ramble was about satisfied he more slowly followed in the same direction.

He had gone but a few steps, however, when a cry arose just in advance; one plainly sounded by Mother Hubbard; and though it was

pitched half in fear and half in defiance, he quickened his steps and went to her aid.

He was not long in discovering her again, and then he saw that she was attacked by two men.

They did not seem to be making much headway, though, for she was keeping them back with her cudgel, her voice arising in the meanwhile with peculiar sharpness.

"Get out!" she cried. "Take yourself off, you loafers. Clear out, or I'll crack your cocoanut for you. Take that! Hi! how did it feel?"

She had hit one of the men a lusty blow over the head, and if his oaths were a criterion it did not feel good.

It had the effect of thoroughly angering the men, and Joe knew they would soon overpower her. Such being the case, he resolved to take a hand in the game.

Drawing two revolvers, he pushed further forward.

"Hold up there, gents!" he called out. "This woman ain't playing a lone hand. I'm here, and I've got two trumps. Draw off, or I'll vibrate the lead."

It was a warning not to be disregarded, accompanied as it was by a double click as the hammers went up, and the men paused and looked sharply through the darkness.

"Who be you that's airin' your English?" growled one.

"I'm the chicken with these sixes, and I never miss when I pull. Gents, your company ain't wanted here. You can git!"

"By ther Eternal, we don't git!"

"Then the woman does. She don't hanker for your company. Either let her go, or go yourselves."

"Who says so?"

"I do."

"Who ther blue blazes be you?"

"I'm a rank-poison centipede, with a sting at every corner. Names don't count, but I mean business from the word go. Let the woman alone!"

"See yer, you undersized galoot, I b'lieve I know ye."

"I don't care a flea's bite whether you do or not. What I say is solid, though."

"You, Jaguar Joe—you jist let up, or I'll double you up like a jack-knife. Yar-whoop!"

The fellow tried to intimidate the boy by a bellow, but he might as well have tried to move the Salmon River Range.

"Talk is cheap, but bullets count here. You'll get 'em if you don't hustle. Are you going?"

The fellow stormed and swore, but the boy practically had them at his mercy. They had no weapons except knives, and they avail little against revolvers when one is kept from close quarters. They were very mad at being thus baffled by one so young, but that was all the good it did.

Jaguar Joe held the drop.

Satisfied that this was so, they finally decided to accept the inevitable and, turning, strode suddenly away, leaving only the threat that he would hear from them again.

Joe now looked for Mother Hubbard, but she was not to be seen. She had taken advantage of the dispute and made good her retreat.

When satisfied that this was so Joe also deserted the vicinity. He knew there was a possibility that the men might return and try to get at him, and he had no desire for a fight now his object was accomplished.

Who were the men? He had been recognized and called by name, but he did not remember seeing either of them before. They, as well as Mother Hubbard, were surrounded by an atmosphere of mystery. He paused for a moment at the suspicion that the three might be leagued together, and the quarrel only a part of a plot, but he discarded the idea after a little thought.

Going on, he reached his room without further adventure, but as he started a light he was surprised to see on the table a sealed letter which was addressed to him.

He opened it and read as follows:

"JAGUAR JOE:—The best thing you can do is to get out of Barrel Gulch on the run. The air here is deadly to you. People who are numerous and powerful have an eye on you, and they mean business. Unless you leave you are a gone coon. Blood will flow—your blood. Take warning and go!"

"THE DEATH-PARDS."

Joe read this note through with some surprise, but as it was only in keeping with the events of the evening, this feeling soon passed. He asked himself seriously if he was the victim of a big joke, or if he was really menaced by foes who meant to do him harm.

If it was the latter, what was their object? The most likely theory was that it was due solely to the fact that he had secured the Moun-

tain Gap stage, but he could not help remembering the affair at Abe Albert's and wondering if that had anything to do with it.

In any case, he did not intend to be driven away. If his correspondents meant war, war it should be.

CHAPTER V.

THE OBSTRUCTION IN THE GIANT'S THROAT.

ACCORDING to the previous understanding, Jaguar Joe made his trip the next day without any of the men of Lower Pocket with him. There were those who saw him go thus with uneasiness, for the opinion was almost universal that Upper Pocket would try some lawless scheme sooner or later; but the stage could not always go with a guard, and Upper Pocket would find itself in a bad fix in the end if it molested the United States mail conveyance.

No trouble occurred on the way to Mountain Gap, and in due time Joe had the mail aboard and was on his return. He had two passengers—one a rough-looking man of middle age, with but a single arm; the other an aristocratic-looking old gentleman, with white hair and good clothes.

From the first Joe was impressed with the idea that the old man was some one of importance. He made no effort to give that impression, but his looks and manners went further than words.

Joe had heard him addressed as Mr. Rodley.

The one-armed man introduced himself. He had taken place with the young driver on the box, and was not in the least bashful about talking.

According to his own account, he had been a remarkable man in his day. He had lost his arm at Lookout Mountain, he said, during that great "battle above the clouds," and where he had before been a man who thought nothing of worsting half a dozen foemen at one sweep, he had become only a maimed veteran—a left-handed man, with none too good use of that.

"But I've bossed many a gang o' miners sence '65," he added; "an' they'll all tell you that Simon Coon is all right in the brain, ef he is shaky o' limb."

He held up his single hand, which shook as though from palsy, and as such things usually have an effect, Joe decided that though Mr. Coon was not a modest man, he might be a worthy one.

As for Mr. Rodley, he was inside the stage and made no effort to talk.

The vehicle rolled on until half the journey had been completed. They were then in the heart of the mountains. The stage usually reached Lower Pocket an hour after dark, but when the ascent of ground was passed, Joe could send his four blood-bays at good speed.

The up-hill work was necessarily slow.

They were now in the Giant's Throat—a long, very narrow cut where the cliffs arose high on both sides, at times almost meeting at the top. At mid-day it was dusky and gloomy in this place, and when the sun once struck its westward course, night practically fell in the Giant's Throat.

Such was the case as the stage rolled through, and the leading horses became obscure and almost shapeless.

Jaguar Joe did not pretend to see the road in advance, so he had no warning that anything was wrong until the horses came to a halt and refused to move.

"There's some obstruction; I must see what it is," he said, to Coon, as he arose from his seat.

The bays had shown no signs of fear, so he did not believe any living object was there. Probably it was a rock which had become loosened and, falling, had barred the way. Such things had happened in the Giant's Throat before.

He descended and walked ahead of the horses. It was easy to see the cause of the stoppage. A fallen tree barred the way: one which had been considerably splintered in its fall from the cliff, but which still retained enough substance to stop the bays.

It did not seem to be a serious affair, and when he had tried it with his shoulder and found it immovable, he started back to get a hatchet he had on the stage.

As he did so he heard some noise from that direction which sounded a good deal like a groan, but he disregarded it and went on, thinking one of the passengers might have been speaking to the other.

He had taken only two steps, however, when he stumbled and fell. He knew no obstacle had been there a moment before, and was taken wholly off his guard.

He was partially up in a moment and turning toward the object, and then he saw that it was a man. A second glance showed him it was Simon Coon.

"What's the matter?" he demanded.

"Oh! I'm a dead man!" groaned the ex-soldier.

"Did you fall off the stage?"

"Yes; oh! yes."

"Where are you hurt?"

"Here—my head. Oh! it's all caved in; smashed like an egg-shell. My brains hev all run out."

Joe passed his hand over the man's head, but his last startling assertion did not seem to be verified. His head still retained its usual shape, nor could the young driver find any dampness to show that blood had been spilled.

"I reckon you'll be all right in a minute," he began to answer, but, just then, a new sound, but one which naturally recalled the groan, arose from behind him and nearer the stage.

It was a stifled cry, as though some one was in pain.

"Ha! what's that?" the boy cried. "Is Rodley in trouble, too?"

"He's gettin' impatient, likely," said Simon, with a readiness surprising in a dying man. "Raise my head. I can't sca'cely git my breath."

The direction went unheeded. The idea was strong in Jaguar Joe's mind that the cry he had heard had been one of real trouble, and a really startling suspicion flashed upon his mind.

Might not the fallen tree be a part of an ambush, and all these groans and cries a part of it? Might he not be in a trap laid by the men of Upper Pocket, or, worse still, by regular road-agents?

He thought of the precious mail-bag, first of all, and moved toward the box, where he had left it, unheeding Simon Coon's prayer for him to remain by him.

As he did so he saw a shadowy form leave the further side of the stage and steal away. More than this, the boy saw under his arm some object very much like the mail-bag.

Jaguar Joe was all alive in an instant, and laying one hand on the neck of the nearest horse, he went over the two with a vaulting spring.

The robber heard him alight and turned his head. He saw him and started to run.

Joe did not utter a word, or try to draw his revolver, but he shot away in pursuit like a bloodhound. If the robber thought he was going to outrun him he made a big mistake. Joe went two steps to his one; he moved like a flash; he cut down the intervening distance and then, like a silent avenger, sprung at the man.

He alighted squarely upon his back and they went down together. As they did so, Joe's hand touched the mail-bag and he knew he was on the right track.

After that he hesitated no longer.

He went at the man like a tornado let loose. Old days had proved him a good fighter, and he had never before been quite so much on his fight as then.

The mail-bag must be saved.

Never afterward was he able to describe that struggle. It was indescribable, being very much like a strife between two cats. Over and over went the two, using fists and feet by turns. Joe was unable to get in a good blow, however. When he hit hard the stranger seemed to dodge by instinct.

The end came in a peculiar way. Both had struggled to their knees, but Joe had managed to force his opponent backward when the latter uttered a cry of pain. One of his legs had doubled under him in such a way as to cause positive agony, and he could not avoid the cry. The young driver improved the chance. Swinging the man sideways, he flung him over on his back and grasped his neck.

"Surrender!" he cried. "Give another kick and I won't spare you a fraction. Cave, old man!"

"I cave," was the ready reply. "Ef I ain't got enough on't, I'm a sardinal sardine."

Just then came another cry from the stage, and it seemed very much as though murder was being done there. But how could Joe go to the rescue? His present prisoner was an elephant on his hands.

"If I let you up, what'll you do?" he asked.

"Run like a line-backed skipper," the man declared.

"Then, do it!"

Joe stepped back a pace, at the same time cocking a revolver.

"Now, get!" he ordered. "Disobedience means death."

"I'm off, pard."

The man was off in a twinkling, going on good time, though whether he kept his word and went like a line-backed skipper, we have no means of deciding.

His conqueror then had a chance to turn his attention to other matters. He caught up the cherished mail-bag and started for the stage, revolver in hand, but a stern voice promptly broke the silence.

"Hold up there, young feller! If you ante-up 'round here you're a dead daisy before the fall winds whistle. Stay where you are or smell powder."

The voice was so commanding that Joe involuntarily obeyed, but though he looked for the owner of the voice, he could not see him. Darkness, complete and impenetrable, seemed to hang about the coach, though there was a bright spot at the further side of the cut which indicated that a light was being used somewhere.

Jaguar Joe was not the person to be frightened by a mere threat, however.

"Get away from my coach, or I'll shoot you!" he retorted.

"Don't do it. Think again. Take water, or take lead."

By this time Joe had the men located, and he resolved to make matters decidedly warm for one of them. He dared not fire for fear of hitting old Mr. Rodley, but he swung the mail-bag up before his head as a shield and then dashed forward at full speed.

He was resolved to preserve his outfit or fall in defense of it.

CHAPTER VI.

THE SHERIFF AND HIS WAR-PARTY.

JAGUAR JOE was well aware that he was running the risk of getting outside of flying lead when he made his rush, but he stooped low and, keeping the mail-bag before his head, went forward with long bounds.

"Hold up, there! Back, or I'll fire!"

The unknown man was airing his voice again, but he only threw his wind away. Joe did not stop worth a cent.

Crack!—crack!

A revolver spoke twice and Joe heard a rending noise near his head as though the mail-bag had fulfilled its mission. Then he was beside the stage.

He saw a man with one foot on the step, half within and half out the vehicle, and one outstretched hand held a revolver. Quick work was needed, and the necessary nerve was not lacking. With all his force Jaguar Joe swung one end of the heavy mail-bag at the man's head, and the fellow disappeared like a flash. His head went down and his heels up, and he fell backward into the vehicle like a hoop.

In a moment more the boy driver would have followed, but just then some one grasped him around the waist. The person was a fool not to pinion Joe's arms, and he found it out at once.

Without trying to turn Joe swung the mail-bag around sideways, hitting his new assailant squarely in the head, and the man went over like a ten-pin.

"Help, here; help!"

The call came from the stage in the unmistakable voice of Mr. Rodley, and Joe resolved to use severer weapons than he had been using. He drew a revolver and leaped inside the stage, but when he reached there he could see only one person.

That was undoubtedly Rodley.

"Where are they?" the boy demanded.

"Gone!" said the old man, faintly. "Out that way. Catch them, catch them. They have half killed me."

Joe sprang through the stage, but there were no signs of the unknown men. The cut was perfectly silent, so far as he could hear, except for the restless movements of the horses.

He turned again to Rodley.

"Have they robbed you?"

"Yes. My watch, and what little money I had, are gone."

"Well, I reckon that's all they will try to do. They made a move for the mail-bag, too, but slipped up on their game, and I reckon they have now taken themselves off. I don't hear a sign from them. What shall we do?"

"Drive on, I suppose. My loss will not break me. If they are gone we had better follow their example before they return with reinforcements."

The suggestion seemed sensible, and Joe resolved to get in motion again as soon as possible. Investigation showed Simon Coon still on the ground near where Joe had first seen him. He

persisted in saying that his skull was crushed in and his brains flowing around loose like a young deluge, but when he was helped upon his feet there was no evidence that he was severely injured.

Jaguar Joe used his hatchet vigorously on the fallen tree for awhile—examination showed that it had been cut off at the base, not blown over—and soon had the way clear.

He then got Coon into the stage, mounted the box, placed the mail-bag between his feet, touched up the horses and rattled away.

Good time was made after that. Pursuit was feared, and Joe sent the blood-bays right along through the Giant's Throat.

The top of the ascent was reached, and then they rattled down the other side. No further trouble occurred, and Lower Pocket was reached on such good time that no one there had begun to fear anything was wrong.

They were soon undeceived, however. The mail-bag had a bullet-hole in one side, and the bullet was found in a package of campaign papers circulated by the Honorable Mr. Wingame, of Holdfast; Rodley was bruised and his garments torn; and Simon Coon persisted that he was suffering from "concussion of the brain and ossification of the heart," caused by his terrible experience.

Lower Pocket was excited. The audacity of whoever had attacked the stage aroused their indignation and seemed to call for prompt vengeance; but above all went their enthusiasm over Jaguar Joe.

He had defended his sacred trust against odds and brought the mail through in safety, and Lower Pocket was ready to support him as the most heroic youth in all Idaho.

Mr. Rodley had borne the loss of a gold watch and a hundred odd dollars philosophically, but after retiring to his room he suddenly descended in a state of agitation and excitement.

"Have you looked in the stage?" he asked of Joe, anxiously.

"Not yet, sir."

"Do so at once, will you? I have lost more than I thought."

"Money?"

"No, papers. Papers of value."

"We will look at once."

Rodley accompanied the searchers and showed by his manner that he was not exaggerating. Whatever he had lost, he was a good deal affected by the misfortune.

The coach had been drawn into the hotel barn when they arrived, and an examination was at once made. As soon as a light was flashed inside, a white paper was revealed lying on the floor and Rodley's face brightened, but closer notice showed that it was only a stray letter.

The most rigid search failed to reveal Rodley's papers, and though he said but little, he trembled with excitement.

Attention was drawn from him, however, by a remark from one of the other men.

"Boys," he said, excitedly, "I b'lieve here's a clew."

"To what?"

"The stage-robbers."

"How so?"

"Look at that."

He held up the envelope before mentioned, and all read the address:

"NICK C. HICKENS,

"UPPER POCKET,

"IDAHO."

"It's an old one, you see, and didn't come from the mail-bag. Moreover, it wa'n't there this morning when the stage went out. It's been dropped sence. Now, who has been in the stage?"

"Only the passengers, myself and the robbers," replied Jaguar Joe.

Both Rodley and Coon denied having ever seen the letter before, and there was only one way to account for its presence in the stage, and the men grew stern and angry.

Nick Hickens was a citizen of Upper Pocket, and had been one of the foremost in urging the claims of that village to post-office. Now, it seemed that the general fear of trouble from the beaten men had been well grounded: they seemed positively connected with the robbery in the Giant's Throat.

"I demand the arrest of this man," said Rodley, promptly. "I have been robbed of valuable papers, and there can be no doubt but this Hickens was one of the robbers."

"Don't you fear but he'll be arrested," said one of the men quickly, for the bad blood occasioned by the late rivalry had not been wiped out by Lower Pocket's victory.

"At once?"

"Yes."

"Delay may be fatal, you know."

"Thar won't be no delay."

There was but little delay in starting the arresting party. Sheriff Jones took the matter in hand, and a party was formed to proceed to Upper Pocket. Ten men, all told, were to compose it. Jones was a bold fellow and would have readily undertaken to seize Nick Hickens alone, but it was expected that Upper Pocket would "jest stan' on its hind legs an' howl," as one of the miners expressed it, when it was known that the sheriff of Lower Pocket was after one of its citizens.

Hence, the need of ten men.

Among the number were Joe Leonard and Mr. Rodley. Sheriff Jones wished to leave the latter behind, but he was so anxious to secure his precious papers that he would not listen to good advice.

So he went along.

Lively times were expected. Nick Hickens was no child. On the contrary, he was a burly blacksmith, a man with a huge arm and a hard head; a fighter and, if report went for anything, none too regardful of the merits of his case.

The posse went well-armed and prepared for war, and they made rather a formidable army as they went down Barrel Gulch. Unfortunately, they realized this, and, much to Jaguar Joe's regret, were inclined to be hot-headed and boastful.

He believed that the quiet way was the best.

On the way he had some talk with Rodley. The latter said the missing papers had been in the breast-pocket of his coat. He had not felt the robber's hand in that place, and did not suspect that they were gone until he reached Lower Pocket. In answer to the question if he was sure they had been taken in the stage, he answered emphatically in the affirmative.

As to the nature of the papers he vouchsafed no explanation, and slight evasions on some points led Joe to believe he really had something to conceal, or that he did not trust them fully.

His object in coming to Barrel Gulch was, according to his own statement, merely to see the country. The youth suspected he had some other object.

When the edge of Upper Pocket was reached the party halted and Jones did a little scouting to learn if Nick Hickens was still in his shop.

He returned with the information that the place was in full blast, and the natural inference was that Hickens was there. The sheriff argued that he had probably returned there after the robbery at full speed, in order to try to prove an alibi if one was needed.

"But it won't help him ther good o' a flea-bite," declared the sheriff. "He's Uncle Sam's meat, an' he'll get chawed all ter bit. Come on, my braves!"

And the party marched toward Hickens's shop, determination on every face.

CHAPTER VII.

THE BLACKSMITH TALKS MYSTERIOUSLY.

THE clang of iron and steel sounded loudly from Nick Hickens's shop as the sheriff and his posse rode up, and when Jones crossed the threshold he saw the blacksmith and his assistants busily working.

Hickens, a burly man with black hair and beard like the mane of a horse, was shaping a shoe for that species of animal. He looked up as Jones entered, but his face grew dark and sour when he saw who it was.

"Good-evenin', Nick," said the sheriff.

"Evenin'," growled Nick.

"I've a bit o' business with you."

"Fire ahead."

"I 'pose we step aside and talk pe-rivately."

"Thar ain't no need o' pe-rivatelyness, ez I kin see," replied Nick. "Unloose yer jaw ef you've got aught ter say."

"Wal, I hev. Whar was you when I called two or three hours ago?"

Mr. Jones intended to be wily and foil an alibi.

"Out in ther mount'ins, huntin'."

"I b'lieve you always hunt alone."

"Bet yer life. Don't want no greenies 'round me."

"Exactly. Now, then, Mr. Hickens, allow me ter inquire what sort o' game you hunted?"

Hickens, brawny, sweaty and blackened, looked steadily at his questioner. He held his hammer in his hand and looked grim enough.

"What sort o' game?" he repeated.

"Ay."

"Wal, I reckon that's my affair."

"It was when you hunted. Now that it's over it's ther affair o' ther public. Nick Hickens, I arrest you in ther name o' ther Commonwealth o' Massachusetts."

Mr. Jones was originally from the Bay State, and he occasionally forgot that he was in Idaho and rung in the high-sounding expression so familiar to his youth.

"Ther dickens you do!" ejaculated Hickens.

Possibly he spoke a little stronger than that, but "dickens" looks better in print than some other words.

Work was suspended in the shop, and Hickens's two assistants looked belligerently at the sheriff. No one could fail to see that trouble might follow.

"On what charge?" the blacksmith added.

"Robbin' ther stage."

"Hang ther stage. I have never set eyes on it."

"No? Mebbe you didn't drop on it in ther Giant's Throat an' play Dick Turpentine an' Claude McDougal?"

"No, I didn't."

"No? Mebbe this ain't your letter?"

"O' course it is, Nick C. Hickens—that's me."

"Mebbe you didn't drop that in ther stage when you went through the passengers?"

"No, I didn't."

"It's false!" exclaimed Rodley, "I recognize your voice, and I accuse you of robbing me. Sheriff, do your duty."

"I will. Nick Hickens, you're my prisoner, and I've come ter take you ter Lower Pocket." Jones advanced, but Hickens raised his hammer.

"Stand back!" he ordered. "I ain't goin' ter be scooped in by no Lower Pocket game, now you bet. Keep away! I won't be took, an' I'll crack ther head o' ther first man who tries it on. Boyees, arm yourselves!"

The blacksmith's assistants each secured a hammer, and they faced the posse grimly.

Jones knew that delay was dangerous. If he gave them time enough all of Upper Pocket would soon be by Nick's side. The only way was to strike at once and secure the coveted prisoner.

"Your hammers don't amount ter ther perfume o' an ox-eyed daisy," he retorted. "Revolvers count. Boyees, cover these critters, an' ef they ante up ugly, plug 'em. That's right. Now, Nick Hickens, drop that hammer, or I'll blow your front teeth through ther bellows!"

The blacksmith looked like a cornered rat. There was a trifle of anxiety in his face, but his "sand" was good. He turned his gaze on Jaguar Joe.

"I s'pose you're ther galoot that makes the charge," he said, slowly.

"Partly," Joe acknowledged.

"Then I want a word with you. No, I don't mean no treachery. See—down goes my hammer. Let me whisper in yer ear."

"Do it, Joe," said Jones, after a pause.

The youth had no objection, so he went a little aside with Hickens. He watched the man warily, but he did not raise a hostile hand. Once aside he spoke in an eager, though subdued, voice:

"See hyar, boyee, I ain't guilty. Let me out o' this, an' I'll make it ter your advantage. Ef you ever want Roema Albert, don't crowd me. I hold ther cards in my hand which settle ther hull game. Use me fa'r an' you kin hope fur her. Refuse, an' I tell ye ther thing will go ter dogs, pell-mell."

"What do you know about it?"

"More than you guess. Enough ter turn ther scale one way or t'other. I'm givin' ye ther straight tip, honest Injun. What say? Is it a go?"

"No, it ain't a go! I ain't a politician, so I can't make any trade. If you are innocent of the crime charged against you, you need have no fear, anyhow."

"But my liberty is worth a pile jest now."

"Sorry, but it ain't my game. I really make no charge, but, as the stage-driver, I suppose I shall be called as a witness. I can't say you were there; I can only tell how the letter was found."

"That's no evidence," said Hickens, eagerly. "B'lieve me, I ain't guilty. Convince Jones o' that an' let me go free, or contrive ter give me liberty fur three days an' I'll see that you hev Roema. Without me, you can't never git her; that's Gospel truth. Come, will ye do it?"

"What have you to do with Roema?"

"More'n you think. I can turn ther scale for or ag'in' you. I sw'ar it. Come, now, is it a go?"

Hickens showed great anxiety, but Joe, though a good deal affected by his allusions to Roema, naturally concluded that it was only a device to save himself. What could he have to do with the girl and her future, one way or the other?

The answer seemed to be plain, and Joe refused to consider his proposal. He moved away, greatly to the relief of the sheriff, who was growing impatient. The latter then called on Hickens to surrender at once.

The blacksmith's face grew dark and he looked at them as though he would gladly have swept the whole lot out of existence, but he sullenly said that he would make no resistance.

When Jones produced the handcuffs, however, he started back abruptly.

"No!" he said, fiercely. "I won't have them on."

"You must."

"I'll see ye all hung first. Keep ther bracelets away. I'll go quietly without 'em, but I'll brain ther man who tries ter put 'em on!"

There was business in his voice, and though Jones hated to yield his point, not deeming it safe, he decided not to be too stubborn. Ten men certainly made a strong guard, and a safe one if all Upper Pocket did not turn out.

But as they emerged from the shop it seemed as though all Upper Pocket had turned out. Half a dozen men were at the door, and more were seen coming.

One of those already on hand blocked the way and proved to be Sheriff Shea, of Upper Pocket. He at once espoused Hickens's cause, claiming that Jones had no right to arrest him there, and a bitter dialogue ensued.

Jones saw by the temper of the crowd that he could not get his prisoner away by force without serious trouble, so he endeavored to convince Shea peaceably. The attempt was a failure, and in the mean while all Upper Pocket was gathering, and all the bitter feeling of the vanquished competitors for the stage-route broke forth when they knew that the sheriff of the rural village intended to arrest one of their citizens.

It was unanimously pronounced an outrage, and the stalwart men fingered their weapons and muttered darkly to each other.

Serious trouble was brewing.

During this talk, as Jaguar Joe stood on the outskirts of the crowd he felt his sleeve pulled. He turned and saw the singular woman who had called herself Mother Hubbard. She was dressed the same as before, and she shook her staff at him in the old way.

"Now, then, you've put your foot in it, so quick, ain't you?" she demanded.

"Not that I'm aware of; my number four-teens seem all correct. What do you mean?"

"Let Nick Hickens go, or you'll never win Roema."

Joe could not avoid a start.

"What the dickens do you mean?"

"Just what I say. I gave you some good advice last night, but you flung it over your shoulder. Now, I say, Let Hickens alone or Roema is lost."

"Woman," said Joe, earnestly, "for heaven's sake, don't keep me all in the dark. If you know what you are talking about, tell me, too. What has Hickens to do with Roema? Put away all this mystery. Talk plainly."

"I've got but little to say, but what I do say is solid as flint. You are preparing to lose Roema. If you want her, release Hickens."

Joe would have disregarded this warning entirely, but he remembered that the blacksmith had said just about the same thing. Could it be there was anything in it?

"Is he her friend?" he asked.

"No. He's her enemy."

"The dickens he is! Then he had better go along to Lower Pocket."

"I tell you it will ruin her."

"You ask me to swallow too much. I can't bolt the moon. If it isn't impolite, I'll remark that either you take me to be a fool or are one yourself. I decline!"

"You are mad. I tell you he must be saved. Hal too late!"

A cry had arisen from the Upper Pocket men, loud and angry.

"Down with Lower Pocket! Defend our honest blacksmith. Down with the toughs!"

CHAPTER VIII.

ABE ALBERT TALKS WAR.

WHEN the men of Upper Pocket said, "Down with the toughs!" they referred to the men of the rival village, and they meant business. Sheriff Jones had failed to convince them that he had the United States Government at

his back when he proposed to arrest Nick Hickens, and that that authority would deal justly with him; and Sheriff Shea had failed to convince his rival officer that he had no right to make an arrest there.

Jones was resolved to carry off his prisoner; Upper Pocket was resolved he should not.

Then the storm burst.

Immediately after that shout the crowd rushed forward, flourishing weapons. Formed in a compact body, Jones and his men met them in the same way.

Yet, both parties hesitated to take the lead in firing.

Jaguar Joe lost sight of Mother Hubbard, but another familiar form appeared. Pete Clayton, his rival for Roema's hand, came swooping down upon him furiously.

"Hyar's at ye!" cried the young ruffian. "I'm on deck again, an' I'll break you inter tooth-picks. Take that!"

He struck out lustily at Joe's head, but, the same as on a former occasion, he failed to get in his work as he intended. He hit only the air, while Joe, who wished for no further trouble with him, dodged nimbly to one side.

Clayton, however, was not to be turned from his purpose. Both his head and his pride suffered in the previous encounter, and he had now come for revenge. He intended to have it, regardless of the fact that Joe had plainly proved himself the "better" man of the two. So he quickly recovered himself and again advanced to the attack.

"Keep back!" warned Joe. "I want no trouble with you, Pete—"

"Well, you'll git trouble!" shouted the bully.

"I tell you again to keep back."

"I won't keep back. Hyar's at ye!"

He came swooping down again, and Joe no longer hesitated. A lively skirmish was being carried on between the citizens and Jones's posse, and, well aware that no one could remain neutral, he saw that Pete must be disposed of first of all.

He therefore met him firmly, and half a dozen blows were exchanged quickly. Clayton used more skill than before, and managed to ward off his rival's hits.

"This is just ther occasion I've been bankerin' arter," he said, with a grin. "I'll put ye whar Roema won't be squintin' at ye in ther peacher furiod."

"I'll fix you so you can't squint at all, unless you go away and mind your own business," said Joe, indignantly.

"Why don't you do it? Come on—come an' see me! My compressed combination o' pugilistic prominence, allow me ter tweak your nose."

The fellow tried it, but Joe Leonard had borne all he could. He struck aside the extended hand, and then went at Clayton like a tiger. He hit him right and left, finding little or no trouble, drove him back, and ended by knocking him into a crowd of women who had collected to see the fight.

Pete disappeared among them, and did not at once come upon the scene again.

Jaguar Joe turned to the other men. The fight was still in progress, but the attempt to rescue Nick Hickens from his captors did not seem likely to succeed. Jones had several hard fighters to back him, and they had closed around the blacksmith solidly. The latter was out of the fight. When trouble began, Jones had deftly slipped the handcuffs on his wrists, and Nick had evidently forgotten that he had a pair of feet well adapted for kicking.

Not a shot had been fired—a singular fact for a border fight.

One thing Joe saw which did not please him so well. He saw Mr. Rodley being dragged away by Hickens's two assistants in the shop, and it occurred to him that it was a scheme to deprive the prosecution of their chief witness.

He therefore dashed away in pursuit.

Rodley was struggling with all his strength, but that amounted to but little when opposed to the burly young blacksmiths.

Young Leonard's appearance put a new face on the matter.

"Hold up!" he cried. "Let go that man, or I'll make it warm for you. Here are my revolvers, and I mean business."

He had drawn the weapons as he spoke, and the men halted. Rodley called excitedly for help, for something else called for Joe's attention just then. One of the men had a long stick in his hand, and he struck out so quickly and surely that he hit Joe's arm and sent one of the revolvers flying through the air, while the blow half-paralyzed the boy's arm.

Before he could recover, both his new enemies turned upon him, and he only escaped serious injury by leaping back and placing his back against a cabin. He raised his remaining revolver, believing his life to be in danger, but the blacksmiths took the alarm at once and turned away.

But in the mean while, Rodley had disappeared. He might not be far away, for the darkness would easily hide him, but it was clear he had left the immediate vicinity.

Seeing this, the blacksmiths evidently decided to abandon their attempt against him and look after their superior, so they hurried away.

Jaguar Joe, however, did not go that way. He feared that Rodley had lost his head through excitement and alarm, and wandered away where harm would come to him. That Upper Pocket would at least secrete from his friends a man who could tell so much against Nick Hickens, was not accusing them of a very improbable weakness.

So Joe called the old gentleman's name, and failing to get an answer, hurried away to look for him.

His search took him near Abe Albert's house, and the sound of angry voices inside caused him to pause. He then looked through the window.

He saw Albert, Roema and—Mr. Rodley. The latter and Abe were facing each other, hostility expressed on both faces.

"I say, what d'ye want hyar?" demanded the saloon-keeper, in a loud voice. "Be you took deaf? Ef not, say yer say an' then levant, afore I chuck ye out!"

"Oh, father," interrupted Roema, "it was my fault that he came here. I found him wandering near where those dreadful men are fighting, and when I saw he was old and feeble I took him here. I did not know—"

"You don't know nothin'," growled Abe. "Git away ter yer room. Scud! D'ye hear?"

"I'm not going to leave this old man till you promise to treat him well," said Roema, with heroic firmness.

"You ain't?"

"Pardon me, but I mean it. No!"

Albert stamped on the floor, and then clutched one of his legs convulsively. He was confined to the house with rheumatism, and when he momentarily forgot his affliction it proved its loyalty by not forgetting him.

Jaguar Joe gazed on this scene with considerable curiosity. His first idea was that Abe was simply angry because a stranger had intruded there, but there was that in Rodley's expression which indicated that Albert was not so very much of a stranger to him.

He now spoke in a deep, though hardly firm, voice.

"You need not trouble yourself about me, Abe Albert. I have no desire to share your society."

"Then why are you pokin' your nose in hyer?" growled the rumseller, surlily.

"The girl has told you. There is a riot in the village. I became confused and was going at random, and she took me in here. I will say, however, that the girl's kindness led me to suppose I was going to the house of an honest man."

"What was ye doin' with ther gal?" asked Abe, still strangely suspicious.

"She happened on me by chance. I suppose she noticed my white hairs and respected them. She, at least, was kind. Strange fact, if she's your daughter. Is she?"

"O' course she is."

"Tis hard to believe."

Rodley looked kindly at Roema, whose pretty face interested him a good deal.

"It is, hey?" retorted Abe. "Wal, I ain't goin' ter be called a liar in my own house. You git out o' hyer on ther jump, or a epizootical epidemic will elevate ye ter ethereal spears!" and the ruffian swung a big fist threateningly before the old man's face.

"Father!" exclaimed Roema.

"So you're still hyer, be ye? You'd better cl'ar out."

"I protest against such treatment of an old gentleman," she indignantly said.

"You kin protest till ther cows come hum an' ther skies rain trade-dollars. I'm runnin' this ranch, an' 'tain't no asylum fur idiots nor lunatics; not any. Old feller, you amble!"

He moved toward Rodley again, but there was a sparkle in the old man's still keen eyes which indicated that he was not inclined to obey tamely. Jaguar Joe, watching from the outside, suspected that whatever the former acquaintance of the two had been, it had been of such a nature that Rodley viewed the saloon-keeper with hostility and indignation.

Now, however, he deemed it best to interfere to save him from injury at Albert's hands.

Consequently, he entered the room and touched the old gentleman's arm.

"Mr. Rodley, I have come for you; let us go," he said, quietly; not speaking to Roema, but giving her a glance he knew she would well understand.

But it was Abe Albert who was the most affected.

"Durn my cats, ef you ain't hyar!" he cried. "You pestiverous slump, I'll bust yer jaw all 'round ter windward. Say yer prayers, ef you've got any handy!"

CHAPTER IX.

CAGED.

ABE had taken down a revolver from a shelf, and his expression showed that he fully intended to use it, but Roema sprang between him and the object of his anger.

"Father!" she exclaimed, in horror.

He raised one hand to strike her, but Rodley seemed suddenly endowed with the strength and agility of youth. He sprang forward and caught the hand before it could fall, at the same time wresting away the revolver, Abe being too astonished to resist.

"Coward!" exclaimed the old man, indignantly. "Would you strike your own daughter such a brutal blow? I knew you were a mere brute, but this is too much. The law should deal with you!"

He pushed the saloon-keeper back so vigorously that the fellow fell over a chair to the floor, and then roared lustily as the rheumatism caught him again.

"Go!" said Roema, quickly, addressing Rodley and Joe. "He will not harm me, but you are not safe here."

"That's the best way," said the youth. "Come, Mr. Rodley."

The old gentleman was still reluctant, but as Albert did not show further signs of hostility, he yielded to these arguments and went out with his young friend.

Joe glanced back toward Hickens's shop.

"The best thing we can do, sir, is to hasten at once toward Lower Pocket. Jones is working this way, in spite of the opposition, and as we can't help him much we may as well go. Once at our village, I'll raise more men to come to the sheriff's aid."

The boy was anxious to go to his aid at once, but he knew that it would be so hard to care for Mr. Rodley that his help would thus be overbalanced.

Much to his relief, the old man fell in with his plan and they walked briskly down the gulch. Rodley's thoughts, however, were not on the fighting.

"Is that fine girl really Albert's daughter?" he asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Stranger!"

"She don't resemble him in the least."

"I should say not. Has he a son?"

"No, sir."

"Have you ever seen a boy about the place?"

"No."

"It is not likely. He is probably dead."

"Whom do you mean?"

Rodley started, and seemed to arouse from a deep train of reflection.

"No one that you ever knew, my boy."

"Did you once know Abe Albert?" curiously asked Jaguar Joe.

"I did, but I knew no good of him. He wrecked my life, turned me from a happy home to a life of wandering—but never mind. You will not understand. But for him I should not be in Idaho, though."

"Did you come to look for the boy?" persisted Joe, who felt a good deal of curiosity in regard to his companion.

"Scarcely, I do not think he is alive. But we will not talk about it. We are nearing Lower Pocket, I see."

They were nearing the village, but before they reached it they met a dozen men hurrying up the gulch. They had discovered that fighting was going on, and were going to help their comrades.

Rodley declared his ability to go the remainder of the way alone, and Joe turned back with his friends. Before they reached Upper Pocket the fighting was over. The men of that place had discovered that they could not rescue Hickens without resorting to deadly weapons, and, for some reason, they hesitated to use them.

Consequently, the blacksmith was brought into Lower Pocket in triumph. He had ceased all show of resistance and became quiet, but he

persisted in emphatic tones that he was innocent of any and all connection with the stage-robbery. Rodley, however, reiterated his assertion that he had heard his voice during the attack on the stage, and the letter told heavily against him, so he was consigned to prison. At Rodley's request he was searched for the papers the latter had lost, but they were not found.

One-armed Simon Coon had been in a very weak state ever since their arrival at Lower Pocket, and had been attended by Dr. Longlife. Coon claimed that he had been knocked from the box of the stage by one of the robbers, and repeated his assertion that his head was a total wreck, but the doctor assured him he would pull through all right.

The veteran came to Jaguar Joe when the latter was at liberty.

"How are you feeling now?" the youth asked.

"Mighty bad, thank you. My skull is fractured, an' I hev a stoppage o' ther heart," and Simon caressed the parts named and groaned lugubriously.

"Is it as bad as that?"

"Worse. I'm afeerd I'll be gathered ter ther arms o' Napoleon, Wellington an' them old soldiers afore ther week is out. There is times when my heart don't beat fur five minutes. I'm in a bad way."

"But the doctor says you will recover."

"A doctor's prognostic ain't always reliable. Ef you had convulsions o' ther brain would ye expect ter git well?"

"I might, with care."

"An' you might not," said Simon, sarcastically. "Ef you'd been at Lookout Mountain an' them places you'd be better posted on cause an' effect. That's all!"

And Mr. Coon hobbled away in high indignation at having his asserted collapse doubted.

Joe finally managed to get to bed, but he did not at once fall asleep. He had exciting things to reflect upon, and about some of them hung an air of mystery. Naturally, he thought most about those which most concerned him, and on one point he meditated long and earnestly.

What had Nick Hickens to do with Roema Albert? When arrested the blacksmith had asserted that his imprisonment would harm her and ruin Joe's chances with her. Later, Mother Hubbard had said the same thing. Was there anything in it?

Practical common-sense said No, yet the unanimity of the two warnings troubled Joe not a little.

When he fell asleep he dreamed that Hickens was proved to be the Prince of Wales, in disguise, and that he had gathered an army and was ravaging the country. He had captured the people of the two villages in Barrel Gulch, and was going to put Roema to death. For what? Because, as Hickens asserted, his younger brother, a man with a tall, white hat, had lately been murdered in the Albert house, and Roema was accused of the crime.

This dream awoke Joe, and he at first wondered why he had thus associated the man with the white hat with the mystery, but maturer thought convinced him all things are possible in dreamland. Still he devoted the next half-hour to thinking about the disappearance of the Englishman, and the blood-stained hat—and then fell asleep again.

When he awoke it was broad day. He arose and began dressing, and as he did so he noticed a folded paper on the floor. He picked it up, unfolded it and read these words:

"JAGUAR JOE:—Be warned in time. You have not forgotten the Englishman who called at Abe Albert's cabin and was seen by Roema. Remember the blood-stained hat. Roema's future demands that that mystery be cleared up. Nick Hickens is the only man that can do it. Release him at once or Roema is lost! This is not idle talk; it is the solemn warning of one who dares not speak plainer. But you can save the girl. There is one way, and one only. Free Hickens at once. Delay is fatal. If you hope to win Roema, do as I bid you."

That was all; there was no signature; but Jaguar Joe remained staring blankly at the paper. What did it mean? Every one seemed resolved to talk in the same vein so far as Nick Hickens's control over Roema's future was concerned, but here were even more pointed assertions.

The anonymous writer spoke of the man murdered, or supposed to have been murdered, in Abe Albert's cabin. It was a subject of which Joe had supposed all were ignorant except Roema, himself and the guilty parties. Now came this note—from what source? Certainly not from the assassins; they would not dare to betray so much.

"Who, then, was the writer?"

Joe was unable to solve the riddle, and as he had ample time before the stage left, he resolved to see Hickens and try and bring him to time.

He was soon in the jail, and he noticed that the blacksmith's eyes brightened at sight of him. Neither came own to business at once, though. It was Joe who broke the ice.

"I want to speak to you about what you said last night at your shop, Mr. Hickens. You claimed to be able to control Roema Albert's future."

"So I did," Hickens emphatically replied.

"In what way?"

"All ways."

"I mean, how can you do it?"

Hickens's eyes sparkled.

"What'll you give ter know?"

"Well, I generally know what sort of an article I am buying before I invest."

"Haven't I told you?"

"Not by a long chalk. You say you can control the girl's future, which is a wild statement on its surface. How can you control her future the matter of a pin? Are you her father? No. Her guardian? No. So far as I know, you never spoke to her."

"What I say is solid, all ther same," doggedly replied the blacksmith.

"Prove it."

"Not while I'm in prison."

"Why not?"

"Ther price o' ther proof is my freedom. I'm bolted up hyar charged with a crime o' which I am innocent; I swar that. Ef you'll git me out, I'll work ther racket in your favor an' save you an' ther gal, but ef you refuse, I'll shut my clam-shell tighter than a brick."

"But what can I do?"

"Swar I wan't at ther Giant's Throat."

"I have already said I didn't know, and Rodley swears you were there."

"Wal then, contrive ter free me unceremonious this evenin' an' I'll make it all right."

"What will you do?"

"Help you an' Roema."

"How?"

"Oh! I'll tell ye that later. D'ye s'pose I'm goin' ter give away my recipe an' then git left? Nary time. You jest let me out, unbeknown ter ther rest, an' you kin take my solemn word that I'll act squar'. I ain't givin' ye no taffy, fur I kin do what I say. But ef I'm shet up hyar it won't take but a few days ter ruin Roema's chances forever."

"Now, you puzzle me again. What difference will a few days make?"

"What difference will it make ter a dyin' man?" Hickens retorted.

"There's no danger of your dying."

"Durn yer thick head, I didn't say thar was," said Nick, angrily. "You're wuss ter ketch on than a mule. Now, you kin jest bet I ain't goin' ter give no bill o' particulars. I've tole you Roema's future, an' your future, depends on your settin' me free. So it does. I won't talk till I be free. Now, then, you kin come ter time or not; I don't keer a cuss!"

The blacksmith had struck a very surly mood, and when Jaguar Joe saw the folly of reasoning with him, he resolved to use another course.

"Mr. Hickens," he abruptly said, "what about the Englishman?"

If he had thrown a hand-grenade at the prisoner, that man would not have looked more astonished and startled. He half-rose from his seat, and then sunk back and sat staring at the youth.

"Wh-wh-what?" he stammered.

Joe coolly repeated his question.

"What Englishman?" Hickens asked, slowly.

"Come, now, Nicholas, none of your dodging."

You know what I mean. I've got you down fine, and I shall not budge an inch. I say, what of the Englishman?—and I mean business."

The blacksmith drew a long breath, and then his face assumed a look of defiance.

"I don't know no Englishman," he declared.

Just then the door opened and a man announced that Joe's team was on the stage, and the latter knew he must go. He had, however, found a weak point in his man and meant to use it.

"Nicholas," he said, as he arose, "I'll give you until this evening to come to terms. I've found out all about you, and I am going to use the knowledge. I want you to confess. Do so, and I'll help you all I can. Refuse, and I'll show you no mercy. That's all!"

What Hickens had to confess Joe did not know, but he spoke with seeming confidence, and then turned and strode from the room.

CHAPTER X.

SIMON COON PLOTS TREASON.

"WHY don't he come? Ther sun is two hours past noon. Hang it, I reckon he's prowlin' round Abe Albert's cabin. No man is good fur nothin' arter he gits stuck on a woman."

"Right, gentle Ben. As Tom Moore said:

'My only books were woman's looks,
And folly's all they've taught me.'"

"I don't know Tom Moore, but I do know women. An' I know Pete Clayton. Whar is he now? Pretty feller, he is, ter keep us waitin'."

"Perchance he got laid out in the riot last night."

"By thunder! ef he has, I'll go fur Roema Albert!"

"Ha! ha! Amiable Ben, you are not true to your creed. You rail against women, and then seize the first chance to woo them. Well, well, you are not unlike other men. As Dryden said:

'As for women, though we scorn and flout 'em,
We may live with, but cannot live without 'em.'"

"See hyar now, you, Jim Raceline, what be you givin' me? Let up, will ye? I don't Dry—what's-his-name, any more than I do Tom Moore. Cheese it! Your head is full o' stuff that'll bring ye ter a bad eend, some day."

Raceline laughed lightly.

"Have your own way, Benjamin, and while you're doing it I'll take a nap. If Clayton comes, stir me up."

The two men were lounging in the shadow of a gulch half a mile from Upper Pocket. In appearance they were very different. Ben was a "tough." It was written on every line of his coarse, brutal face, and he looked likely to grace the gallows some day, or die in a brawl, boots on and thirsting for blood. Jim Raceline was his opposite in all things except rascality. There he was a bird of like feather; his handsome, intelligent face was wild, reckless and bad.

He had barely settled down for his "nap" when footsteps sounded, and he aroused.

"Pete!" said Ben.

But it was not Pete. Instead, it was the man we have known as Simon Coon. He seemed to have recovered from his heart disease, concussion of the brain, fractured skull and other ailments, for he moved with a strong step.

Both Ben and Jim greeted him, but he looked around for some one else.

"Where's Clayton?" he asked.

"Whar you was a bit ago—missin'."

"Not here yet?"

"No."

"Confound the fellow!"

Coon's uncouth speech and ways had disappeared, and he looked and acted like an intelligent man.

"Remember he's our lord and master," said Raceline lazily, as he lit a cigar.

"Ban! he's no master of mine. Where is Krieg?"

"Laid up. Jaguar Joe gave him a headache when we fought in the Giant's Throat."

"That fellow is a fiend."

"What do you expect? I hear he got his sobriquet by killing a jaguar when he—the boy, not the jaguar—was only twelve years old. Such a kid would naturally be a good one at eighteen. But, friend Spring, Coon, or whatever you call yourself, what of affairs at Lower Pocket?"

"Hickens is in jail."

"Alas, poor Yorick—poor Hickens, I mean."

"The old man swears that he was among the stage-robbers."

"Unlucky Hickens. Will they hang him?"

"Perhaps so."

"Better that he should hang than us. He's a stout fellow and can bear it better. 'Twill soon be over, and; as our old friend, Macaulay, says:

"To every man upon this earth
Death cometh soon or late."

"Never mind your poetic recollections," said Coon, curtly. "What I want to know is, when will there be a division of the spoils? I'm dead broke."

"So say we all of us. Pity we didn't get the mail-bag that day."

"You fellows used no sand. If I'd had two arms, I would have killed that young demon."

"I tried it," said Raceline, lugubriously. "I fired at him, but he used the mail-bag as a shield and then wiped me over the head with it. Egad! I swapped ends and went through the stage like a flash. But here comes Peter, who is surnamed Clayton."

It was that young desperado, but he did not seem in much better mood than the others. In

fact, he was the ugliest-tempered man there. He had a black eye and a bruised cheek to remember Jaguar Joe by, and when Raceline bantered him about them, he broke into a storm of words more loud than polite.

"I've got a pill hyar fur ther chap that did it," he declared, "an' he'll take it without any coatin'. Never mind that, though. Thar's work fur us ter do."

"Drop on Jaguar Joe again?" sneered Coon.

"No. Thar's an innercent man in Lower Pocket prison, a'cused o' robbin' ther stage. We must git him out ter-night!"

The prospect did not seem to please the others.

"Why?" Ben asked.

"Because he's innercent. You wouldn't hev him suffer fur what we did, would ye?"

Raceline whistled.

"When did Pete Clayton turn saint?" he demanded.

"None o' your back-talk."

"Eh?"

"I say I'm boss hyar, an' I'm ter be respected."

"My dear Peter," drawled Raceline, "you are not my boss, and my respect for you ain't equal to the perfume of an ox-eyed daisy."

Pete laid his hand on a weapon, but dropped it after one good look at the speaker's well-knit form.

"Never mind. I trust, though, fellers, that you're with me ter rescue Nick Hickens?"

"What is he ter us?" Ben asked.

"Fu'st, he's innocent; next, he's useful ter us in ther town, Nick is."

"In what way?" Coon asked.

Clayton looked annoyed.

"Various ways. He's helped our interests a good bit, though I've never said much about it."

"No—you haven't," said Coon, dryly. "I reckon I shall not risk my head for him."

"Nor I," said Raceline.

"Nor I," added Ben.

Clayton looked decidedly troubled and tried to change their views, but he did not succeed. Hickens was not one of their number, and they did not see why they should be called upon to risk their precious necks, especially as it was Pete who had got the blacksmith into trouble by dropping the telltale letter in the stage. Pete made a most earnest argument to change their opinion, but all he could say did not move them.

They next called on him for money, and he handed over a handful. It was so little that all grumbled, and he had to make various explanations to satisfy them. These explanations seemed far from satisfactory, and if Pete aspired to be king among them, he must have been disappointed at the feeling of the ground under his feet.

"The next thing in order," he said, "is a job for either Ben or Raceline."

"What is it?"

"I'll give either one of you a hundred dollars to shoot Jaguar Joe, providin' you do ther job at sech a time ez I am sure o' provin' an alibi."

"I'm no hog," said Raceline; "Ben may grapple the job and corral the shekels."

Ben looked thoughtful, but finally agreed to take the job, and details were discussed. It was Clayton's idea that the safest way was to shoot the young Jehu from the top of his stage while he was driving through the Giant's Throat, and Ben coincided.

While they talked none of the quartette suspected that other eyes were on them, but such was the fact. Crouched among the rocks was what seemed to be a little, old woman; but there was little to be seen about her save a shawl, huge bonnet and veil.

Plainly, she did not intend to betray her identity.

Yet, had Jaguar Joe been there then, he would have recognized Mother Hubbard.

She was watching these precious plotters and hearing all they said.

The conference broke up at last, for Pete Clayton desired to return to Upper Pocket, and he went away and left the others.

Mother Hubbard cautiously followed at a safe distance.

Simon Coon looked at Ben.

"Don't Krieg need looking after?"

"Praps I hed better give him a bit o' water," agreed Ben, as he arose and went aside.

"Good riddance!" said Coon. "I want a word with you, Raceline. Let us walk aside before Ben returns. That's it; we'll go this way and hide ourselves among the rocks. Raceline, I am tired of our compact."

"What compact?"

"That with Clayton."

"Oh! Are you so fickle?"

"Look you, Raceline, I am a man of business, and my business is to make honest dollars on the road. That's why we all came to this region. Bah! what have we made? Not enough to buy decent clothes, nor shall we while we follow at Clayton's heels. There's nothing in this region worth our pains. Come, Raceline, am I not right?"

"Hang me if you ain't."

"What then?"

"Let us skip by the light of the moon."

"I have another rod in the fire, Jim, and you and I may make a dollar and pay Clayton for luring us here. Why is the fellow so anxious to get Hickens out of jail?"

"Give it up."

"I don't. 'Tis because Hickens is useful to him; because Hickens holds a secret which Clayton is anxious to know. Do you follow me?"

"As far as you've gone—yes."

"I'll go further. You can scarcely guess the secret which Hickens holds, so I'll state it as plainly as I know. Clayton and Abe Albert have an enemy. Who he is, or why he is their enemy, I have no idea. This much I do know, though; they took the blacksmith into their confidence, their enemy was imprisoned somewhere, and Nick Hickens was made his jailer. Unluckily for Clayton & Co., they do not know where the party was confined; Hickens alone holds the secret; and Pete and Abe are confronted with the fact that their prisoner will speedily die of starvation unless they can rescue Nick, or at least get his secret from him. That's why Clayton is so hot to rescue Hickens."

"Where is the prison?"

"That's what only Hickens knows."

"And the prisoner is starving?"

"Not yet, perhaps; but he will starve unless Nick opens his mouth to some one."

Raceline had listened with close attention, and he now nodded quickly.

"You have some plan. What is it?"

"Scarcely a plan, for there is no groundwork for one yet; but it occurs to me that if we—you and I—could find this prison, we would hold the balance of power and be able to make money out of either Clayton or the prisoner."

"But you have no idea where he is confined?"

"Beyond a doubt it is in the mountains somewhere."

"Rather vague. But you may have some scheme for finding the place."

"Only one, and that is for me to gain entrance to Hickens, some way, and get his secret."

"Very good in theory, but how will you do it?"

"Not one at Lower Pocket suspects me of being anything more than Simon Coon, the broken-down ex-soldier. I fancy I have played my part well. Now if I can use my position there, I may be able to get Nick's secret."

"Do it, if you can. We have been brought to this region on a fool's errand, and we may as well turn an honest dollar when we can."

"You and I?"

"Yes."

"Leaving out Ben and Krieg?"

"Yes, again."

"Good! Shake on it!"

They shook hands, and after some further talk, separated. Raceline returned to his companions, while Simon Coon started back toward Lower Pocket, trying to form a way to get Nick Hickens's secret.

CHAPTER XI.

RODLEY FINDS A GUIDE.

"I'm Billy Goat, ther Rocky Mountain Bighorn, an' I'm a king o' my species. You don't know me hyar, but whar I'm knowed I'm acquainted. I'm a Rocky M. sheep, with antlers like a cobra capuletto, an' I kin turn a back-somersault over a cliff three thousand feet high an' never jir ther tooth-picks in my pocket. I kin drink whisky, too, an' ef ther bloom o' yer noses ain't deceptive, so kin you. Gents, waltz this way an' take ther wet in out o' ther wet. Walk up, run up, creep up, roll up—anyway, so long ez you git hyar. An' you hev got!"

He was a stranger to Lower Pocket, and not a prepossessing stranger either, with his rags and dirt, but he had sounded a cry that warmed the average Lower Pocket heart and brought the patrons of the Sunflower saloon all into line with their fists on Carl Meinke's bar.

"All ter once now, gents, an' may we never git dryer than we be now. Ez ther poick sez:

'P'izon, p'izon, sparklin' p'izon,
How it glitters in ther cup;
How we love yer red horizon,
As we gaily drink you up.'

The stranger had "caught on" largely, and his poetic effusion was greeted with cheers.

"Wait a bit," he added; "ther poick also sez:

'Tanglefoot, I've poured you down my neck,
All ther way from Maine ter Boffin;
Therefore am I now a lifeless, total wreck—
Toes turned up inside my coffin.'

The poetic fever of the anti-temperance men died away somewhat at this extract from Mr. Billy Goat's lively fancy, and he chuckled loudly.

"Don't please ye so well ez t'other, does it? Wal, ther truth is seldom pleasant ter man, boast or woman; thar'fore, I advise ye not ter trifle with it. I, Billy Goat, ther Rocky Mountain Sheep, hev tried 'em both. When I was a boy I wanted some cherries in a big tree in ther garding. Naturally, I tuk a hatchet an' chopped down ther tree. That eve my honored parient asked me who did it. Sez I, 'I can't tell ther truth—don't lick my brother—I did it.' Foller my egg-sample, feller-citizens, an' you may grow up a man like me; able ter jump off a cliff six thousand feet high an' never turn a hair. That's my style, an' I'm Billy Goat, ther R. M. Sheep. Dispenser o' devastatin' drinks, set 'em up ag'in, an' let all go merry as a marriage matinee."

The stranger had established himself at Lower Pocket; at least among one grade of citizens; and when he had invited the thirsty crowd up for the fourth time his stock stood high above par.

But Billy was a man of nerve and a man with a purpose, and he did not allow himself to be oblivious to what was transpiring around him. On the contrary his eyes were always busy, and at last a new light appeared in them.

Looking from the window he had seen Mr. Rodley passing along the street, and from that moment his present companions had no charm for him.

"Pards, I must now t'ar myself away from you fur a brief speriod o' time, but I am in yer town ez a fixture, like a handle ter a pump, an' you'll see me ag'in. When I come, we'll imbibe one't more. Es ther poick sez:

'Tap ther barrel, turn ther faucet,
Ketch ther liquor, quickly pass it;
'Tis fur men with broken heads,
Carpenters erect our downy beds.'

And now, pards, so-long!"

With a farewell flourish of his hands Billy left the saloon. He did not at first show signs of haste, but his strides were long and he soon overtook Rodley.

"Bottom o' ther top o' ther mornin' to yer, this p. m.," he said, familiarly. "Takin' a stroll fur yer health, I reckon."

Rodley looked at him sharply, but his dirt, rags and perfume of whisky were not inviting.

"Perhaps," he answered, stiffly.

"Wait a bit, general. I hev a brief song ter sing in yer ears, an' you'll find me a sweet singer with a cinder in my eye. Your name is Rodley, I reckon?"

"Yes."

"Come ter Idaho ter look up a missin' boy."

Rodley started, and seemed to grow more interested.

"What do you know about it?"

"A good deal, I reckon. Likewise, you have a pard floatin' 'round loose whose name is Harry Russell."

"I admit it. Why do you ask?"

"I am dee-rected by Harry ter guide yer ter him."

"Impossible! He is not near Barrel Gulch, is he?"

"Wal, he is, but he ain't in condition ter come inter town an' paint it red. Nary, Harry ain't. He fell among thieves, or road-agents, or somethin' else that was malarious, an' he nigh got his head cracked. He's up in ther mount'ns now, at my cabine, an' he wishes ter see you an' tell what he calls ther latest devil-opements."

"Are you sure he is Harry Russell?"

"Can't say I be, fur I only take his word fur it," said Billy, with an appearance of candor.

"Describe him."

"Sart'in'. He's a man o' middle age, stout-built, with a red face an' bushy side-whiskers; wears a tall, gray hat an' is very much like unter a Britisher."

"It is Harry," said Rodley, quickly. "I did not expect to be would reach here before me. I'll go with you at once. Did you say he was injured?"

"He's got a slit on ther side o' his head seven

inches long, an' he's got ter keep still till ther danger o' fever is past. But he's in no danger; oh, no! Yer see, ther robbers dropped on him right rough, an' ef I hadn't come ter his rescue he'd hev been a corpus right quick. But I rescooed him, kerried him ter my cabine, an' thar he's been ever sence."

This story seemed all right, and Rodley hesitated no longer. Without stopping to tell any one where he had gone, he followed the self-styled Rocky Mountain Sheep and was led from the town to the rough country beyond. He had good reasons for wishing to see Harry Russell, and an intimation on the part of his guide that that man had something of importance to tell so excited him that he forgot that his present companion was an ill-looking vagabond and followed where he led.

He was thus conducted to a wild piece of territory where even the people of Barrel Gulch seldom went, for there was nothing there to invite them. Barren, destitute of gold, gloomy and dark, no one but an enthusiast of Nature could have felt admiration.

Rodley did not, and he remarked on its somberness with an involuntary shiver.

Billy grinned. He was not affected by the gloomy gulches.

"Rather skeery, I allow," he said, "but right fit fur one purpose."

"What is that?"

"A graveyard!"

"What an ideal! It almost seems that one's bones would not lie contentedly in such a hole."

"I allow they'd lie still enough. Bones seldom git up an' waltz around when thar's enough o' Mother Earth heaped on 'em. Don't ye think ye could rest hyar?"

"Heaven forbid! The mere idea—"

"I'll bet you a dollar you'd never kick. Now, jest mark this place. Ther s'ile is dark an' damp, an' it would cling right lovin'ly ter a feller's remains. Ef I was ter slug ye now, you'd rest ez walez though you had a marble shaft twenty foot high in some Eastern yard."

The guide had stopped and was looking fixedly at his companion. His words and expression sent a thrill of uneasiness through the old man, and he turned away with a shiver.

"Lead on!" he exclaimed. "I've had enough of this wretched place."

"Mister, we're at our journey's eend."

"How so? Where is Russell?"

"Climbed ther golden stair, like ez not; I dunno. Ther fact is, I don't know Russell. I was bired ter bring you hyar, an' my work is half-done. Ther other half is ter let you loose ter find yer dear friend, Russell."

"What do you mean?" demanded Rodley, in alarm.

"Simply this: Mister, your last hour has come. This hyar gulch is ter be your grave, an' I'm ther Rocky Mountain Sheep ter bury ye. Prehaps ye know some prayers you'd like ter hum over afore I send ye off."

Nothing could exceed the cool brutality of his speech and manner, and Rodley felt weak from terror.

"Do you mean you have decoyed me here to murder me?" he asked, in a trembling voice.

"Not ter split words—yes!"

"In Heaven's name, for what reason?"

Billy shook his pocket, producing a rattling sound.

"Fur ther almighty dollar!" he coolly said.

"At whose bidding?"

"Critter, you are inquisitive; mightily so. Still, what does it matter? Abe Albert was ther gent."

"Albert?"

"Yas."

Rodley was silent for a moment, and the ruffian added:

"It seems you are in his way. I opine he has killed this Harry Russell, though I dunno. Now, he wants you. I heard him say that you was poking yer nose inter his affairs, and you would find out all about ther gal."

"What girl?"

"Don't know."

"By my life, I have a suspicion. Why didn't I think of it before? Man, you admit you decoyed me here for money. I will double it—give you ten times as much to set me free. Whatever you ask shall be yours. I'll make you a rich—"

"Hold on! hold on! No, ye don't. You'd go away an' swing yer tongue like a pendulum."

"Not against you; I swear it. I'll never—"

"Right you be; you'll never peach. Come, be you ready?" and the ruffian draw his revolver with a jerk.

The sight was too much for Rodley, and with

only one idea, and that of escape, he turned and fled wildly down the gulch. The traitorous guide grinned, raised his weapon and fired, and with a shrill cry Rodley fell prostrate to the damp earth.

CHAPTER XII.

ROEMA TAKES THE REINS.

A LIGHT figure flying through the gloomy gap known as the Giant's Throat; a mere speck, as it were, with the huge cliffs rising on both sides dark, gloomy and lofty; a dead silence through the gap, as though earth and air paused and looked with wonder to see what meant this fleeing figure.

No pursuer was visible; then why did she make such unusual haste?

The traveler was Roema Albert, and her face bore a look at once alarmed, earnest and resolute as she ran on through the gap.

She seemed to have used this haste for some time. Her face was flushed, her breathing irregular, and now and then she faltered for a moment, as though too weary to go further.

Then she would rally and press on anew.

"Heaven grant I may not be too late!"

She had murmured the prayer more than once, she suddenly paused with the words on her lips and listened eagerly. Then her face brightened.

"He is coming. He is saved, unless—unless—"

She paused again, and then from around a bend in the Giant's Throat came the stage, the bays arching their necks as though proud of their position, and Jaguar Joe sitting on the box, calm and at his ease.

"Saved! saved!" the girl exclaimed.

The outfit advanced, but the darkness of the pass hid Roema from Joe's view. The horses did see her, however, and they pricked up their ears and looked as though in wonder. Joe looked, too, and then, perceiving a woman, he partially reined in his horses.

Roema hastily advanced.

"Joe, it's I!" she said.

Profound astonishment settled on his face.

"You!" he said, blankly. "What in the world are you doing—"

His question was cut short.

"Oh! Joe, I've come to warn you. You're in danger; mortal danger. There's a man going to shoot you from the top of the cliff. Don't you go a step further without looking for him."

"Who is he?"

"I don't know; some one they call Ben, I heard Pete Clayton tell all about it. He has hired the wretch to shoot you. He's going to hide at the top of the cliff and shoot you as you go past. I heard it all."

"How? Where? Clayton did not tell you?"

"No. He told—oh! Joe—he told father, and—father said he had done right."

Roema burst into tears. She had been brave enough when flying through the pass, but all the dismal truth of the case occurred to her now. Her father, the man she had loyally tried to love and honor, was proved the worst kind of a villain. If there had been a doubt concerning the man with the white hat who had so strangely disappeared, there was none in the present case.

Pete Clayton had plotted Joe Leonard's death, and her father had told him he was doing right to remove such a "viper," as he expressed it.

Joe alighted from the stage, soothed the girl, and learned all he could. There was little to tell. Roema had overheard Pete tell Abe Albert that he had hired a man named Ben to shoot the young driver as he rode through the Giant's Throat, and then she had left the house and hastened to warn her lover.

How fast she had run, and how hard a journey it had been, she made no effort to tell, but Joe understood and thanked her accordingly.

"I don't believe Mr. Ben will make his game work, now I am informed," he coolly said. "Of course there is no way but to drive on, but I'll keep both eyes open. I wish I had a rifle, myself—but I haven't. Get inside the stage, Roema, and we will go on."

"No; I'm going to ride on the box."

"On the box?"

"Yes."

"Impossible! You may receive the shot meant for me."

"I'll take the risk. I can handle four horses, I know, and I am going to do it and let you give all your attention to watching for the assassin."

"But the danger."

"Will be no greater for me than for you."

He could not move her from this decision. She had thought it over on her way through

the Giant's Throat and decided that that was best. The man, Ben, might take a notion to ambush himself by the trail—it seemed a much better way than to shoot from the top of the cliff—and if she took the reins Joe could sit with his revolvers ready and try to get in the first shot.

Her plan was worthy of an old-time border heroine.

While they talked they were not aware that other eyes were upon them, but a man had crept from the dark shadows to the side of the stage and was listening to all. He also used his eyes as much as possible, looking for the most part at Roema.

"A beauty!" he muttered to himself. "A perfect houri, whatever that is. Egad! it's no wonder Pete Clayton is stuck. But, Lord love us! he is no more worthy of her than a swine is of old wine. Egad! how would Jim Raceline fill the bill?"

The speaker was Raceline, himself, and his avowed admiration for Roema was not feigned. To see her was to admire, in any case.

"So they both ride on the box, eh?" muttered the road-agent, anon. "Good! Now, I begin to have a plan. I'll enter the interior of the stage and go along, and if by any good chance Ben is ambushed by the way, and can drop Jaguar Joe, I'll rise up, seize the outfit, gobble the mail-bag and Roema, and start life anew. Ben shall be my cat's-paw!"

Thus, when Joe and Roema mounted to the box and the stage rolled on, Raceline was inside and grimly chuckling over his own success.

He made an opening through the cover, where he could watch the pair, and went into ecstasies over the girl.

"Egad! she handles the beasts like a born Jehu! Now, then, with such a wife as that a man would be a king, and his realm an Eden. Oh! she's a good one!"

Once the impulse came to him to thrust a knife into Jaguar Joe's back as he sat on the box, but, wild and wicked as Jim Raceline was, he was not so bad as that.

The stage bowled on through the Giant's Throat. Roema was thus far a success as a driver, though there had been no actual test of her ability, and Joe sat beside her, a revolver in each hand, and watched the shadows keenly for any enemy who might appear.

He had strong hopes, however, that nothing serious would occur that day. Roema was doing what she thought was best, and was sincerely anxious to help him, but he would much rather have the would-be assassin defer his work and strike when Roema was not there.

What if a stray bullet should strike her? Joe shivered at the thought, and for a while his hand was unsteady and the dark shadows at the base of the cliffs looked gloomy and threatening enough; but he shook off the feeling and faced the danger resolutely.

The stage rolled on and Roema held the reins in a firm grasp. Had it not been for the anxious expression on her face no one would have suspected she was ill at ease. She believed she was helping to save Jaguar Joe's life, and that gave her courage unusual to a young girl.

But Joe began to breathe easier as they went on without mishap. A little further and the worst part of the Giant's Throat would be passed.

Ben would hardly think of ambushing himself where daylight fairly penetrated.

But another narrow place was approached. There the cliffs arose high and almost met at the top. The shadows lay thick and heavy at their base.

Into this dark spot the stage went. Joe Leonard bent down, and with his revolvers ready for use, peered keenly into the recesses.

What was that dark figure which might have been a rock, but which the young driver had never before seen there. Hal! it stirred, and Joe saw some object outstretched as though it might be a pump-handle. The sight stirred him to instant action. Here, at last, he believed he saw the assassin.

He raised his revolver, took quick aim, such as it was, and pulled the trigger. Just a breath later came another report, a flash from before the dark figure, and a bullet whistled over the boy's head.

The assassin had fired and missed, but an oath from the darkness indicated that he had not escaped unhurt.

But that was not all.

The four spirited bays, startled by the unusual sounds, gave a simultaneous leap and the stage seemed to leave the ground, so violent was the jerk.

Roema was almost flung from the box, but

her hold on the reins saved her. She uttered a cry of horror, however, as she saw Jaguar Joe involuntarily leave his place beside her, and shoot forward, helplessly, directly toward the assassin.

The unexpected mishap dazed her for a moment, but she was of a brave nature and she speedily recovered her self-possession and tried to rein in the bays.

Vain attempt! Thoroughly frightened, the horses went flying through the Giant's Throat at break-neck speed, heedless of her puny strength on the reins. She was dimly conscious of speaking to them and trying to quiet their fears, but it was a vain attempt. It was a veritable runaway, and she realized her inability to control them.

"What shall I do?" she cried, thinking of Jaguar Joe left helpless, perhaps senseless, with the assassin.

"Allow me to help you!"

It was a quiet voice at her side, and as she looked around in surprise she saw Raceline by her side. He had clambered over and now gained proper position on the box, taking the reins from her unresisting hands.

She had never seen the young man before, and she leaped to a natural, but incorrect conclusion.

"I did not know there was a passenger aboard," she said, quickly.

"Still, there is, as you may see," Raceline replied, not at all disappointed by her mistake.

"Can't you stop the horses?" she asked.

"I can try, miss, and I think I shall succeed."

He applied himself to the task with skillful, steady hands, showing that he was no novice with the reins, and the bays soon showed signs of yielding, though it seemed to Roema he did not appear in haste to check them.

"Can't we turn here?" she asked, nervously.

"Not just yet, miss."

"But Joe will be killed."

"Joe? Who is Joe?"

"Mr. Leonard—the driver."

"Oh! well, Joe ought not to have left the box."

"He didn't do it on purpose."

"No?"

"No, sir; he fell off. Oh! sir, turn the horses and let us go back. They are now quiet; we can turn here."

"My dear," said Raceline, coolly, "don't worry about Joe. He'll come up all right; never fear. I wonder you give him a thought while I am here. Don't I fill the gap?"

"You!"

"Yes, my dear; I, your true lover. Fair Roema, never mind Joe. You have here another lover; one who will be true to you through thick and thin. After this, we'll never be parted!"

At the last words he passed one arm around her waist, and, though she struggled desperately, pressed a kiss to her lips.

CHAPTER XIII.

LOST: A STAGE, AND SOMETHING MORE.

In all his experience on the box, Jaguar Joe had never before been thrown as he was thrown in the Giant's Throat. How he managed to lose his prudence and his position he really never knew; but the fact remained that he left the box and went flying directly toward the assassin, Ben.

As luck would have it he struck upon his feet, but, the shock was so great, he fell to his knees, and then Ben saw what he thought was his chance.

He was already wounded, but not disabled, and he drew a knife and rushed upon the young driver.

Joe was not taken by surprise. He had expected some hostile movement, and considered himself lucky in not being obliged to meet a bullet. When he saw Ben rush forward, he made no effort to regain his feet, but, measuring the distance well, caught the fellow by the legs and jerked vigorously.

Down went Ben, with a shock like the fall of a small tree, and in a moment more the knife was wrested from his hand and Joe was kneeling upon him.

"Surrender!" cried the boy. "This ain't any time for fine words; surrender, or I'll drive this knife into you!"

"Hold up! hold up!" cried Ben. "Don't strike. I cave. I'm no fightin'-man."

"Then why did you try to shoot me?"

"I tho't it was somebody else."

"Yes, you did—not. That yarn won't work. So Pete Clayton sent you did he?"

"I don't know no sech man."

"You're a liar, Ben! I have this matter down fine. Pete hired you to kill me; why did he want me dead?"

"He didn't say."

"Well, you tried it on, and I reckon Judge Lynch will take you by the hand to-night."

"Hold up!" said Ben, hastily. "Fur ther Lord's sake, don't be hard on me. Glve me a chance an' I'll help you all I can. I'll blow on Pete; I'll tell how he hired me, but I can't tell why he wanted you dead."

So far, so good; but Joe had a new idea.

"Do you know Nick Hickens?"

"Yes."

"Did he rob the stage?"

"No. 'Twas Pete an'—an' his gang."

"Who are his gang?"

"Raceline an' Krieg."

"Who are they?"

"Men he's got up in ther mountains som'ers," said Ben, who began to feel hot and uncomfortable.

"Ain't you one of the gang?"

"No, no; I ain't—I sw'ar it!"

Ben spoke excitedly, for he was very much alarmed. He knew that if it was proved that he had a hand in the stage-robbery, the honest people were likely to give him a necktie so-cial, and the ground seemed quaking under his feet.

"Strikes me your voice sounds like that of the man who stole the mail-bag and ran, when the gang dropped on me that day."

Ben again asserted his innocence, and though Joe had an idea that with time he could have forced a confession, he thought it best to compromise. He was beginning to worry about Roema. Knowing the bays as he did, he believed she would succeed in stopping them without accident, but he did not care to delay when she might be in danger; so he exacted a pledge from his prisoner that he would go quietly to Lower Pocket and there make a clean breast of it, and then the fellow was allowed to rise.

They took up the line of march for Barrel Gulch with Ben in advance, and Joe just behind with a ready revolver.

The youth looked in vain for some sign of the girl. He hoped to see her returning, but the gap was silent; there was no sound of wheels to mark her return.

He forced Ben to walk at a sharp pace, and thus they went on for half a mile. Still no sign of Roema; still no sign of the stage. Now and then Joe bent to scrutinize the ground. Despite the shadows of the gulch he managed to find the horses' footprints. At first they were far apart, but, anon, the strides shortened and the team seemed to have been going at an easy pace.

Why, then, had the girl not stopped?

Perhaps it was best for her to go on to Lower Pocket; but if she did so, why did she not speed the horses and get there as soon as possible?

That she neither did this nor turned back seemed to imply that she cared nothing for Joe's safety, but he did not take that view of the matter. He had more confidence in her. But the feeling began to creep over him that something was wrong; what, he did not know.

Beyond the Giant's Throat he struck the light, dry sand which bordered Rushing Brook, and he made no further attempt to follow the trail. Instead, he urged Ben on, and reached Lower Pocket as soon as possible.

He drove his prisoner up to the hotel, and the landlord came out with a blank look on his face.

"What's the matter?" he asked.

"Where's the stage?" Joe returned.

"The stage! How should I know!"

"Isn't it here?" asked the youth, blankly.

"No; I ain't seen it sence you left this mornin'."

"Great Heavens!"

"I say, what's wrong?"

"Everything's wrong. Take this man, and lock him up. Where is Sheriff Jones? Send out a dozen of the boys."

The boys had come out uncalled, and all were anxious to know what was wrong. Joe told them in as few words as possible, keeping back for the time the fact that it was Roema who had been with the stage. If she and the vehicle were easily found, he wished to hide her share in the work as far as was possible.

The men of the West get down to business quickly. In five minutes Jones and a half-dozen others were ready for a start. The landlord took Ben to jail, and the others took the trail.

Jaguar Joe had armed himself with a rifle,

and resolution was expressed on his face. The same spirit which animated him when, a boy of twelve, he killed the jaguar on the Sio Saux trail, was again at work, and if, as he had expected, the girl had fallen into evil hands, they would fare badly when they met him.

His greatest hope was that Pete Clayton and Abe Albert had combined and stolen the stage, Roema and all. That was a mishap which could be borne. If the girl had fallen among strangers and thieves—he grated his teeth at the thought.

Unluckily for the searchers, night was close at hand. Only that Joe had been ahead of time when he run into Ben's ambush, it would already have been dark. As it was, the sun had already gone to rest.

Zeke Zane was an old trapper, and he laughed at the idea of the sand baffling him, and settled down to his work vigorously. Half a mile and he had the clew. There the stage had turned sharply to the left.

"Upper Pocket hez scooped et in," said Zane.

"Heaven grant it."

"Why so?"

"The girl's friends are there."

"An' ther mail-bag is on ther stage."

"It's probably ther last time I'll carry it. The United States officials will fire me fer losing it. But there's one drop of consolation; they will also make it warm for whoever has stolen it."

"I reckon I kin attend to that," said Sheriff Jones. "Show me ther thief and I'll hang him higher than Hayseed, ther son of Hamed Arthur, that we read about in hist'ry. I don't allow nobody ter—Hello!"

He broke off abruptly. The stage was before them, standing in a narrow *cul-de-sac*. The horses were in place and at their ease, but in trying to back out of the trap they had cramped one wheel, turned the vehicle around against a rock, and come to a halt, unable to move further.

No human being was visible.

Joe hurried forward and looked inside the stage.

It was empty.

He turned to the men with a set, white face.

"Zeke Zane, do your best now; work was never more needed. Find where they have gone."

"It'll be dark in a minute; ther chances ain't good, but I'll do what I kin. Is ther mail-bag gone?"

It was, and that conclusively settled that desperate work had been done. The lowest of the men of Barrel Gulch knew it was a serious thing to meddle with the mail.

Zane utterly failed to find any trail leading from the place. The chances were all against it, owing to the nature of the soil. While he tried, darkness fell.

A consultation ensued. Some of the men were in favor of going at once to Upper Pocket, but the more thoughtful agreed that the mail would not be taken there. Jones suggested a general search of the vicinity, with the hope that the thief might be found in some recess examining the contents of the mail-bag at his leisure. Jaguar Joe asked for one man to go secretly to Abe Albert's cabin and see if Roema was there. Jones agreed, and then the others began to search as directed.

Joe Leonard went on with feverish haste. Two great emotions stirred him. Roema's peril was a severe blow, and he resolved to be relentless until she was rescued and her abductor punished. Secondly, he felt the loss of the mail keenly, and the thief would fare badly if they met.

His impetuous haste soon took him beyond the other searchers, but he could find nothing of those he sought. He found some one else. From out the darkness came a human form, and he recognized Mother Hubbard.

"You're after her, I reckon?" cried the strange woman.

"After whom?"

"Roema."

"Yes. Can you tell me where she is?" he excitedly asked.

"Certainly, I can; she and the robber, and the mail, and all the *et ceteras* and ramnifications of the barbecue," she replied, with her usual eccentricity. "But it's a desperate chance, and though I can lead you there, I advise you—"

"Lead on!" ordered Jaguar Joe. "Waste no more words. Show me the villain, or villains, and I'll wade into them if they number four-score. Lead on; I follow!"

CHAPTER XIV.

UPPER POCKET "RESOLOOTS," AND SO DOES SIMON.

THE men of Upper Pocket were assembled in Nick Hickens's shop and earnestly considering a certain question.

"I'm no half-way chicken," said a big miner. "I never water my whisky, an' I b'lieve in a man making his 'sand' rattle ter keep it in order. I say Upper Pocket has been robbed. The post-office b'longed hyar. We're older than Lower Pocket; we're smarter, an' richer, an' quicker on ther shoot, an' kin drink more tanglefoot. Thar'fore, we should hev ther post-office. But Lower Pocket got it. More, they hev got Nick Hickens shut up. It stirs my blood ter a hundred degrees by ther barometer. I say Upper Pocket must either rescue Nick, or admit she is a sneakin' coyote with one blind eye, a limp in her right leg an' a wart on her nose. Them's my sentiments!"

The speaker sat down amid cheers.

Another man arose. He was commonly called "Lawyer" Tom.

"Gents," he said, in an oily voice, "I have a word to say. I have good proof that the men of the rival town did pledge, pay, convey and give the sum of twenty thousand dollars to the corrupt United States Government for the Mountain Gap mail-line. No such degradation of the free rights of the people was ever before recorded. Comment is entirely superfluous; it is our duty to rescue Nicholas C. Hickens, peaceably or by force—just as Lower Pocket pleases."

Another man arose.

"But this is a serious matter. Nick is accused of robbing the mail. That makes it the United States Government's affair. It's serious business to buck against such a power; mighty serious, I tell you."

There was a murmur in his favor.

"Unbeliever!" cried Lawyer Tom, scornfully. "I have prepared for all that. Hear this resolution, drawn up all ready for the occasion:

"Whereas, the United States Government and the town of Lower Pocket, by an iniquitous combination, have wronged Upper Pocket by perjury, perfidy, treason, oppression, devastation and low and rascally villainy—

"Resolved: That Upper Pocket do, and does, this day cut loose, sever, abandon, avow, and assert any, and all, connection with the United States. We, the people of Upper Pocket, do hereby secede from the United States, and from this date we will not be responsible for any acts of the United States, direct or indirect. The United States may go it alone, and we'll do the same."

"This, gentlemen, frees us from all obligations to the United States. We can cut and slay, and rescue Hickens, and as we have cast off the United States, we can't be held accountable."

Lawyer Tom's way of cutting the Gordian knot was hailed with vociferous cheers, and the articles of secession were unanimously passed.

The United States had lost one of the brightest stars in her constellation; the republic of Upper Pocket—population, eighty-seven souls—was born!

But when the strong men scattered, and then gathered again, armed to the teeth and resolved to rescue Nick Hickens or make Lower Pocket red with blood, there was a terrible purpose expressed on their faces which might well make well-meaning people shiver with horror.

What tragedy would the night bring forth?

Simon Coon did not forget his avowed purpose. Raceline, Ben, Krieg and himself were all that remained of an old road-agent gang that had once existed in another territory. When it was broken up, they came to the vicinity of Barrel Gulch, lured by Pete Clayton's promises.

As we have seen, they soon decided that they had come to a barren field, and then Simon formed a new plan.

He had accidentally learned that Abe Albert and Pete had an enemy confined somewhere in the mountains; that Hickens was his jailer, and that he alone knew where the man was; and that the prisoner was likely to starve unless Hickens's secret was learned.

Here was Coon's chance to raise a few dollars—perhaps, many dollars—and he resolved to do it; he resolved to get Hickens out of prison, learn his secret, go to the unknown prisoner, and then make all the money he could by releasing him.

That was Coon's one object in life—money!

How he was to get at Hickens he did not know. He had continued to play his part at Lower Pocket, and no one suspected he was a

fraud; he had declared so often that he had been badly injured when he was thrown (?) from the stage that even the doctor began to believe he might be internally injured, and mixed with considerable mirth was an undercurrent of sympathy in his behalf.

This, however, did not give him a chance to rescue Nick Hickens, and much he debated how it was to be done. Had he possessed two arms he would have tried to break into the jail, but his mutilation prevented this, for the jail was very strong.

It was not until Sheriff Jones, Jaguar Joe and their party went out that Coon had what he regarded as an inspiration.

It was one of simple character.

"By thunder! I'll write a note purporting to be an order from the sheriff, admitting me to see Hickens. I never saw any of his writing, but it isn't likely those at the jail ever did, either. It will probably take me in; if it don't, I shall have risked the cast and lost on the die. That's all. I'll try it!"

Fifteen minutes later Simon appeared at the jail. A man named Wolbert was in charge, but he was just outside, watching for signs of his superior's return. Simon surmised the nature of his occupation and commented upon it.

"It's ter be hoped they'll git ther audacious riptyles," added Mr. Coon. "I would like ter be ther man ter pull at ther rope, an' hang ther bull lot on 'em; I would. When a man has concussion o' ther brain, fracture o' ther skull, stoppage o' ther heart an' sech things, he naturally feels a leetle riled up. Eb, Mr. Wolbert?"

"I should say so, Simon."

"I am a total wreck, sir, an' ef these desperate men can't be ketched an' scrudded, I've got ter leave Barrel Gulch. Sech things is too much for my system, which got a bad shock at Lookout Mountain when we fit 'way up above ther clouds."

"You ought to have a pension."

"I'm tryin' ter git one now," said Simon, with a sly meaning the man did not suspect. "But, look here, Samuel, ther sheriff wanted me ter go in an' see that desprit' villain, Nickens, Chickens, or whatever his name is. At ther sheriff's orders, I'm goin' ter give him a chance ter talk or swing—I be! Hyar is ther paper, Samuel."

He extended the forged order, and Wolbert read it carelessly. He did not suspect that there was any trick in it, nor that there was harm in such a broken-down man as Coon claimed to be. The latter was watching him closely, and his hopes arose when he saw how coolly Wolbert was treating the matter. He unlocked the door, and Coon walked in.

He found Nick Hickens in his cell, sitting by a table on which stood a lamp. With a prisoner's desire for occupation, the man was building a block-house of bits of pine.

As Coon entered he looked up quickly, but a scowl crossed his face as he recognized the one-armed man.

"Soft an' easy," said Simon. "Don't look like a pirate. I ain't afeerd o' ye, an' you needn't be afeerd o' me. I come ez a friend."

"Yas, you do," said Nick, bitterly. "You can't stuff that down me. Get out, or I'll strangle you!"

"No, you won't!"

"I won't!"

"No."

"Why not?"

Hickens was angry and belligerent; Coon, calm, smiling and pleasant.

"Because I am not here as your enemy, but to rescue you," and the one-armed man dropped his rude speech.

"Yes, you be!" scoffed Nick.

"I will prove it."

"How?"

"By freeing you."

"Do it, then."

"I will, on one condition."

"What's that?"

Simon glanced toward the door, drew a chair near Nick's, sat down and answered in a subdued voice:

"You hold a secret I want to know. Tell me that secret and I will set you free."

"What secret?"

"The hiding-place of the man over whom Pete Clayton set you as a jailer."

Hickens started.

"What rubbish be you givin' me?" he then asked, slowly.

"If you see fit to regard it as rubbish, there is no occasion for further words between us. If liberty is any object to you, say so at once."

So far as this jailer business is concerned, I can say that I am not trying to get you into any trap. I happen to be well acquainted with Pete, but as he has used me badly I don't hesitate to do him the same turn. I know that he has a prisoner in the mountains; that you were his jailer until captured; that he is now starving or near it. If you will swear to guide me to his prison, I'll release you from here in a very short time."

"What ef I refuse?" Hickens said, slowly.

"Then you can hang, for all I care."

Hickens was but human. He was not guilty of the stage-robbery, but Rodley was willing to swear that he had been there, and Nick feared the consequences. Since he had been in prison he had looked for Clayton and Albert to rescue him. He had watched in vain. They came not. Consequently, Hickens became ugly, and he did not turn a deaf ear when satisfied that Simon Coon was in earnest.

"But how kin you git me out?" he asked.

Coon drew a hammer from beneath his ragged coat.

"One tap with that will place the jailer hors de combat," he coolly replied.

"Then I agree."

"You swear to lead me to the unknown prisoner?"

"I do."

"Shake hands! That's it; now I have only one word more to say. After leaving here we shall take to the mountains together. I am a one-armed man, but I have a revolver with which I can shoot equal to any one. You will be unarmed. Excuse my abruptness if I say that if you attempt to attack me, I'll blow out your brains!"

Hickens did not object to this programme, and the affair went on as planned. Coon knocked for the jailer, who opened the door. Coon passed through, and Wolbert turned to fasten it again. Coon's chance had come. He had drawn his hammer, and with a straight, solid stroke he brought it down on the man's head.

He was ready for a second blow, but it was not needed. With a single groan Wolbert dropped to the floor, and there lay without motion. Hickens had been watching, and he came out quickly; Wolbert was dragged into the cell and left in his place with the doors closed; and then the precious pair set about beating a retreat from the village.

This was not difficult, and in fifteen minutes they were on the mountain-side. Hickens still declared his intention of keeping faith with his rescuer, and he led the way at a pace which indicated that he feared for the unknown prisoner's safety. He acknowledged that he was where he could not escape; that he was wounded, ill and without the necessities of life.

"If we ain't too late," thought Simon Coon, "I'll reap a rich harvest out of this. Shakespeare said: 'Put money in thy purse!' and, by the powers, I'll do it. Lead on, Nick Hickens; lead on! I hope we may not be too late."

CHAPTER XV.

UPPER POCKET'S BOOMERANG.

"THE Assyrian came down like a wolf on the fold," and the men of Upper Pocket adopted the same line of business when they moved to rescue their imprisoned friend. Further than this they did not resemble the Assyrian. Their "cohorts" did not "glitter with purple and gold." Candor compels us to say they were clad, to mention their most conspicuous articles of raiment, in red and blue flannel shirts—and dirt.

It was a noisy march until Lower Pocket was nearly reached; then they paused and began to use some caution.

Club Crabtree, one of Hickens's assistants in the shop, was appointed leader, and he engineered the matter as he saw fit. The rioters moved on the jail.

They could not have taken a more promising time for their attack. Sheriff Jones and several of the best men were away, and those who remained were nearly all at the hotel, talking over the late bold robbery.

It was generally believed that Jones would find the stage and the mail-bag, but the opinion was expressed that Judge Lynch ought to get up on his hind legs and take a hand in the game.

The sacred majesty of the law had been violated, and Lower Pocket was calling on her sons to right her wrongs.

At the same time Upper Pocket was calling on her sons to *wrong the rights* of Lower Pocket—unless what they took to be a call to duty was a deceitful call.

Crabtree led his men as far as he thought he

ould without meeting discovery, and then preparations were made for a rush. The word ran along the line, and then forward dashed the rough fellows, straight toward the jail.

There was no one in the way to oppose them; Lower Pocket was still unconscious of the movement afoot; and they struck the jail like a small avalanche. They had brought axes for use on the door, and they went at it vigorously.

Bang! bang! bang!
Crash! crash! crash!

The sounds arose on the still air loudly enough to be heard some distance, and they knew they would not long have a clear way. Chub Crabtree, bare-armed and brawny, swung his ax until the muscles in his great arms were like ropes, knotting and unknotting.

But the door did not at once give way. The wood was hard and well-seasoned, and the door was thick and strongly put together, and it stood up against the assault bravely.

Hark!—a cry arose from near the hotel. The attack had been discovered; the alarm was given; Lower Pocket would soon be wide-awake.

"Lay on!" shouted Crabtree. "Smash in ther blasted door! Go for it!"

Even as he spoke the door shook with a new tremor; it reeled; and as three axes came down together it burst away and fell inward.

There was a strong disposition to cheer, but Crabtree had cautioned them against that. Instead, they yelled:

"Hickens! Bring him out. Rescue for honest Nick!"

They sprang through the breach like a flock of sheep. Which cell was he in? The question seemed quickly settled. They were but few; only one had a locked door. They fairly swarmed upon it; the axes rung again; splinters flew; a host of demons seemed let loose, and—down went the door!

Ay, down it was, a total wreck, and the rescuers sprang through. A light burned on the table; a man lay on the floor. Doubtless it was Nick Hickens, asleep. They called on him to awake, but as Crabtree seized his shoulder he suddenly recoiled.

"Blood!" he cried. "Devils alive, who has dared harm Nick Hickens? I'll kill them for it!"

He turned the man over. Then all stood dumfounded.

"Not Nick Hickens!"

"It's Wolbert, the jailer!"

"Where is Nick?"

The question was easier asked than answered, but a theory was easily formed. The jailer lay there bleeding and insensible, and it looked very much as though Hickens had in some way turned the tables and escaped.

So decided the mob after a little thought, and they began to think of returning. They had broken the jail for a man who was not there, and some of them began to reason sensibly at last. What they had done was a serious thing. Better get out of it while they could.

It was easier said than done. They surged out of the cell, but at the door they met the men of Lower Pocket, armed with rifles, revolvers and knives, and fully their equals in number.

"Surrender!" shouted one of the new party. "Down with your arms, or we'll fire!"

Something like consternation seized the foremost men. They were fighters, chiefs, kings, and all that sort of thing; they were men of "sand," always ready to paint the town red, or shoot a brother man; but they were now conscious of being at a disadvantage, surprised as they were in nefarious work.

"Up with the door!" cried Crabtree.

The order seemed an inspiration. The battered door was seized and set in place, and a faint cheer arose.

"Let's see 'em shoot through this!" they said, to each other, and a chuckle went around the circle.

But the besiegers did not at once try. There was utter silence outside for awhile, and the besieged had a chance to consult, but no inspiration came to them. The move had proved useless; they were caught in the act; and though they had formally seceded from the United States, they began to have a dim, haunting suspicion that they had not so easily made themselves safe from the wrath to come.

Finally there was a hail from outside.

"Hallo, inside, thar!" called a voice.

"Hallo, yerself!" answered Crabtree, defiantly.

"Come out hyar and surrender."

"I'll see you hung first."

"If you don't, we'll deal with you as rioters an' road-agents, an' abate no jot o' our justice."

"Better ketch yer hare afore you cook him." "I reckon we've ketched him now, or, rather, he has run his head into a trap. You were mighty anxious to get inter ther jail. Wal, allow me ter ask how you're goin' ter git out now? I reckon that, instead o' one pris'ner, we've got about twenty-five!"

A cold chill fell over the men of Upper Pocket. There was a heap of horse-sense in what the last speaker had said. In their blind haste they had not looked ahead, and as a result the whole gang had been trapped like so many rats. Escape they could not while the men of Lower Pocket stood on guard. Had they been outside a rush would have taken the greater part of them safely through, but only two could pass through the doorway at once, and if the besiegers were on the shoot they could drop them as fast as they appeared.

The prisoners looked blankly at each other. The strength of the jail was known to them, and they knew of only one way to get out of it. That way was the door, but it was out of the question.

The situation seemed to them most miserable. Bitter as the rivalry had been between the rival towns, there was no such thing as a compromise, they thought, and with nearly all their own population thus caged, Upper Pocket was at the mercy of their rivals.

Their boom had proved a boomerang.

After some deliberation, and a vain attempt to force their way out of the rear, Crabtree called to the besiegers and another parley ensued. Chub argued and threatened, but all in vain, and he was told in return that if he and his men tried to leave the jail they would be shot down.

They were rioters; they had been caught in an act of lawlessness; and they would be dealt with accordingly.

And then the men of Upper Pocket stormed and howled. They were helpless; they were prisoners; and Lower Pocket had the game all their own way.

CHAPTER XVI.

RACELINE'S FICKLE FORTUNES.

JAGUAR JOE followed Mother Hubbard as boldly as though he had had a dozen men at his back. He was in a mood when he would take any risk, and though a little labor would have given him these men, he did not once think of them.

Mother Hubbard had said that Roema and the robber were near at hand, and his only thought was of rescuing the girl.

The strange guide led the way for a little over a hundred yards, and then entered a gulch running north and south; a dark and dismal place at night.

"Are you all ready?" the woman asked.

"Of course I am. Lead on!"

"Wait! You may need to go slow. Fools rush in where angels fear to tread, and rashness loses many a battle. Look ye, young man, I will show you a hole in the rocks—it may be a great cave; I don't know—where Roema and the robbers are. Will you go rushing in like a Texas steer on a tear, or will you show your brains and be prudent?"

"I shall be governed by circumstances. For Heaven's sake, woman, lose no more time."

"Young man," said Mother Hubbard, sharply, "you think, with your eighteen years of life, that you know everything. Fifteen years hence, you'll find you didn't know anything. But have your own way; come on!"

She led the way a few rods further, and then paused.

"Here is the place, my lord Egotist," she said.

Joe gave little heed to her words, except as they concerned Roema. He saw an opening in the cliff, and, as he bent down, a faint ray of light. What was beyond he did not know, but, without further words to Mother Hubbard, he dropped on his knees and began crawling forward.

He was in a narrow passage which was like a tunnel, and he knew not what sort of a trap he might be entering, but he rather believed in Mother Hubbard, despite her eccentricity, and he resolved to see the thing through.

Not long had he to wait. The light increased; he reached the end of the passage; and before him lay a cave. It was lighted by a fire which blazed at one side, and by the blaze Jaguar Joe saw—Roema and a stranger.

This man, unknown to him, was Raceline.

The youth's greedy eyes saw one thing more. Just at one side lay a mail-bag, and it did not

seem to have been opened. This was a most happy discovery.

But what of Roema? She seemed singularly reconciled to her captivity. Raceline had finished supper and was talking with her earnestly. Joe listened.

"I don't wish to be thought a mere brute, Miss Albert. I trust I am superior to the rough-and-tumble fellows about Barrel Gulch. I have a fair education, and I've lived in the best cities of the East. I have boated on the Public Garden Pond of Boston, rode through New York's celebrated Central Park, Philadelphia's Fairmount—but why continue the list? I commenced to say I had been in these places with ladies, well-born and refined. But none of them were equal to you."

"No!" said Roema, laughing.

"No."

"You don't speak very well of them."

"Wrong; I speak extra well of you."

"Expecting me to believe?"

"I hope you will. I want to begin a new life, and begin by being trusted."

"Shall I give you a recipe?"

"If you will."

"Let me return to Upper Pocket."

"I would if I could, but I can't. You have bound my heart as in a net. In your presence I can only look and admire. I am your slave—to a certain extent. But I shall be worse if I lose you; I shall be your victim. In all seriousness, let me say that if you will consent to become my wife I will abandon whatever wild ways I have, thoroughly reform and begin life anew. Answer, Roema; will you make me happy, and at the same time save a human soul?"

The situation was a peculiar one for Jaguar Joe. Few men are favored with a chance to hear their rival propose to the object of their mutual affections, and few would care to do so. Raceline's voice was earnest, and his manners were certainly those of a gentleman when he cared to make them so. Add to this that he was handsome, and he made a rival not to be scoffed at.

Still Joe's faith was strong. He believed he knew Roema well enough to be sure of her affections, and it was only with curiosity that he waited for her reply.

"If I should answer yes," she slowly replied, "does it occur to you that the answer would affect me as much as you? You say you would be happy. What of myself?"

A shadow crossed Raceline's face.

"Well, what of yourself?" he asked.

"I should not be happy."

"Why not?"

"Because I do not care for you. Why should I? I never saw you until to-day. You must not expect too much. Let me return to my home, and we will see what the future will do toward influencing my opinion of you."

"And that's the only answer you can give?"

"Yes."

"I'm afraid the future won't improve your opinion of me."

With this unexpected frank observation Raceline turned aside and picked up the mail-bag.

"I am about to cut this open. I shall do it in your presence, and thereby put myself in your power. If the chance ever occurs, shall you swear against me?"

"I advise you not to open it."

"Why not?"

"Because it is a crime, and a dangerous one, at that. You ought to know that."

"So I do, but I am going ahead. It won't be my first lapse from grace. I'm a black sheep, I'm afraid, Miss Albert, and inclined to earn my living by the easiest possible way. There may be a few dollars in this concern; I don't imagine there is any great haul for me, for huge fortunes don't jog along over the Mountain Gap trail. Ha! what now? Voices, as sure as I live! Who comes?"

It was a question which also interested Jaguar Joe. Voices had sounded just behind, and he found himself hemmed in between the two parties. More than that, the speakers were advancing toward him. What should he do?

He thought quickly, and then pressed closely against one side of the passage, hoping to remain undiscovered. The hope was not a vain one. Two men passed and entered the cave proper. Then he recognized Abe Albert and Pete Clayton.

Raceline had not arisen, but he had brought his revolvers to the front, ready for work. His expression became sullen when he saw who had come, while Albert and Clayton looked at Roema in stupid surprise.

"Hullo!" said the former. "What does this hyar mean?"

"To what do you refer, Mr. Albert?" politely asked Raceline.

"What are you doin' hyar, Roema?" Albert continued, paying no attention to Raceline's question.

The girl felt relieved, but not overjoyed. The recent revelations had shown her that those who should have been her friends were anything else, and though she was glad to get clear of Raceline, she did not hail their coming as a great deliverance.

"I'm waiting to go out," she replied, to the last question.

"Jim Raceline," Clayton broke forth, fiercely, "I reckon you an' me hev a bone ter pick."

"Never mind, Peter; you can take the whole bone along and gnaw it at your leisure."

"I'll make a bone o' you!" stormed Clayton.

"How dare you steal my gal?"

"Mr. Clayton," interrupted Roema, with spirit, "you had better go and get some common-sense in your head. Your girl! I'd sooner belong to a Chinaman, I would; and I'd go to State's prison for life before I'd have either. Don't be too free with your claims; I am nothing to you, and I won't be. Do you understand?"

Pete heard her, but it only added fuel to his anger. He did not suspect that Roema was a prisoner; he believed that she had willingly cast her fortunes with Raceline, and he resolved to get rid of one rival, then and there.

"Jim, you and me will settle this right away. I don't allow no man ter cut in on me this way, and it's yer life or mine. D'ye hear?"

"I did observe a whisper from your direction."

"Well, I mean business; here's at you!"

The young rough jerked out his revolver and fired with quick aim; but he was dealing with a man more accustomed than he to such wild work. Raceline had watched him with a cold, steady gaze, and as the revolver came up, he flung himself flat on the ground at one side, and the bullet sped harmlessly past.

But the ball was opened, and knowing it could only end in bloodshed, Raceline was not inclined to offer himself as a victim. Even as he fell he swung his revolver hand around where it would be free for work, and in a moment more he was busy.

Crack! crack! crack!

Three shots he fired with wonderful rapidity. At the first Clayton started violently; at the second he turned to flee; at the third he threw up his arms and dropped heavily.

Abe Albert had stood in stupid surprise; but Raceline had opened, and he would not give his other enemy a chance. He turned the revolver upon him.

"Surrender!" he said, sharply.

"What ther blazes do ye want o' me?" Abe asked, his voice as stupid as his manner.

"Well, the natural supposition is that I want you to surrender. That's the size of it. You and I never had any trouble, and I don't hanker for your blood, but I'm going to rule this roost. See?"

Albert did see, but under other circumstances he would have given Raceline a chance to fight for the supremacy. Now, however, he was dazed by the fall of Pete Clayton, who seemed to have gone off the stage forever, and there was meekness rather than hostility in his voice as he asked for an explanation of a scene he had not been able to understand. Raceline read his mood and explained, ending by a proposition that he should take Clayton's place as Albert's favorite, and marry Roema as soon as possible.

The girl, knowing how strongly Abe had been in favor of Pete, did not for a moment believe he would make terms with Pete's slayer, but Abe had been fascinated by Raceline's airy manner, and much to her surprise, agreed.

"I think I have a voice in this matter!" she defiantly said. "If you do imagine I am to be bought and sold like a horse, you are very much mistaken, that's all. You may as well spare yourselves the trouble of laying your plans, for I'll never, never give my consent!"

"Makes no difference whether ye do or not!" growled Abe.

"It makes a good deal of difference!"

It was a new voice which broke in on the discussion, and the trio turned quickly. There, at the entrance to the place, stood Jaguar Joe, a revolver in each hand—one was turned on Albert, the second pointed at Raceline.

His appearance was a surprise to all, but he saw a gleam appear in Raceline's eyes and knew it would not do to trifle.

"Hands up, men!" he cried, sharply. "I hold the drop here, and I'm going to keep it."

Don't be too brash, or you'll get hurt. You killed Clayton, and you can't kick if I hold you to the game you have started. Keep your revolver down or I'll shoot you, girl-stealer and mail-robber!"

Raceline swallowed twice, and then managed to recover his usual coolness. He laughed, but it was not a natural laugh.

"I recognize you," he said. "You are the man who drives the stage—the mature old fellow of eighteen years who aspires to wed pretty Roema. Rubbish! children should be seen, not heard!"

"Nevertheless, you'll hear from me," said Joe, sturdily; "and the first step is to get the mail-bag. Quietly, Raceline—quietly! Keep your hands away from it, or there will be trouble. Roema, be so good as to get it and bring it to me. Watch this six-shooter, Raceline!"

There was need of the warning, for it was a bitter pill to take. The robber hated to lose his prize; still there was no help for it. He read in the light in Joe's eyes a nature as resolute as his own, and he knew it would be fatal to try to draw and fire ahead of him.

Roema moved promptly, and as there was no one to oppose her, soon deposited the mail-bag at Joe's feet. He had won it back, unmolested, and he resolved that he would not again surrender it while life remained.

"So far, good," he observed. "Now, Abe Albert, what I want to know is whether you are on the side of the law or not. Will you be true to your daughter's interests, and at the same time help me take Raceline prisoner to Lower Pocket, or will you—"

Further speech was ended by the sound of voices at the entrance, and all saw that new guests were at hand.

CHAPTER XVII.

CONCLUSION.

For a moment it looked as though the tables were about to turn against Jaguar Joe, but it was Mother Hubbard who first bustled in, closely followed by Sheriff Jones and other men from Lower Pocket.

"Where is he?" demanded the woman. "Where's the man who is down with bullet wounds, malignant diseases and starvation? Waltz him out! We wish to gaze on his classical features. Develop his bodily presence. Present his physical body. I say, where's the man?"

Mother Hubbard sawed the air with her staff as though fencing with a ghost, but Jones came straight to Joe.

"Got the mail-bag back, ain't you, my boy? Done wal, b' mighty, an' hyar are two prisoners. E pluribus! But we've struck ile, too; captured Nick Hickens an' Simon Coon outside. Coon rescued Nick from prison; a whited salt-peter, that Coon is. Seems, however, that Hickens ain't as bad as he was s'posed: had nothin' ter do with ther stage-robbery. Coon has confessed. Say, hev you 'zamin'd ther interior o' this cave?"

"No."

"Hickens says that's a man held prisoner here; an enemy o' Abe Albert an' Pete Clayton. Hickens was his jailer; only man that knowed he was here. Fears he is starvin'. We must look to him right away."

Joe managed to get a tolerably clear idea of what the sheriff was talking about, and while the other men took charge of Albert and Raceline, who dared not resist, three of the party, including Joe and the sheriff, began the search.

A narrow passage led backward, and this was followed for seventy yards. Then they emerged into a second chamber. All was dark there, but they had brought torches, and as they flashed the light around a human being was soon discovered.

A man lay on a bed of pine boughs, covered with a blanket. He was asleep, but they could see a bandage tied around his head and his face was pallid. Around his waist was a chain, which was then run back to a point where he could not reach to unfasten it. Above his head was the stump of a torch, but it had gone out and left him in total darkness.

Roema had followed the party, and she caught at Jaguar Joe's arm.

"The Englishman!" she whispered, quickly.

"What! the man with the white hat?"

"Yes; thank Heaven he was not killed, after all. There is one less misdeed for—for father to answer for."

The sleeping man stirred and opened his eyes. He looked at the new-comers with the light of reason but the glare dazzled his eyes and he began rubbing them.

Joe moved quickly to his side.

"Have no fear, sir," he said. "You are among friends who have come to rescue you."

The chair rattled as the man sat erect, but a new hope was on his face. Sheriff Jones rushed to the extremity of the chain and unfastened it.

The prisoner uttered these words:

"Give me food!" he said.

There was none in the party, but the sheriff had a bottle of whisky—even sheriffs sometimes do—and a taste of this sent the color a little to the prisoner's face.

"Tell me who you be, an' who has did this, an' we'll make ther dry bones rattle like a cyclone," said Jones, warmly.

"My name? It is Harry Russell, and I owe all this to one Abe Albert. He and two accomplices put me here. One of them who calls himself Nick Hickens, but who is really named Green, has been my jailer, but, of late, he has left me without food. I am near starving."

Jones strode out and caught Abe Albert by the neck.

"You slimy snake!" he thundered, "I have a good mind ter strangle yer deader'n Caesar Julius!"

But Roema caught his arm.

"No! no!" she exclaimed. "Whatever his sins, he is my father."

Then Mother Hubbard came to the front.

"Not much, he ain't. Pears don't grow on p'ison ivy. Nary father is he of yours, and here am I, in the full vigor of undaunted womanhood, to prove it!"

She shook her staff at Albert, who plucked up a little of his wavering courage.

"You're mad, woman," he retorted.

"If I'm mad, there's thirty-seven quarts to the peck of method in it. There's a divinity that'll shape your neck for the hangman, rough-shoe it as you will. You can't blow dust in my eyes without a bigger bellows than grows around Barrel Gulch. I say the girl ain't your daughter, and what I say goes as it lays."

Jaguar Joe touched Roema's arm.

"She is deranged," he whispered. "Pay no attention to her. She means well."

Russell had been led from the inner chamber, and after looking sternly at Albert, he seemed to notice Roema for the first time. He gazed earnestly at her, and Mother Hubbard chuckled and came to his side.

"You see the resemblance, do you?" she asked.

He started.

"What resemblance?"

"To Isabel Eastman, stupid!"

"Is there one?"

"Is there? Well, you ought to know. You see it yourself. Of course there is, and there's millions in it. Slow-head, where do you suppose Rodley is?"

"That I don't know," replied Russell, who seemed lost in wonder.

"Well, I do, and I'll take you to him in the oscillation of a mule's hoof. Then there'll be a development. Follow me, all who want light, and I'll give you plenty of it at Upper Pocket. Brace up!"

Her language was so peculiar that all continued to believe her deranged, but just then a messenger arrived from Lower Pocket to say that the men of the rival town had attacked the jail, but being overreached, had all been confined there. The presence of Jones was desired.

That official prepared to go, but Mother Hubbard took him aside and spoke a few earnest words. The result was that the sheriff announced that they would go to Upper Pocket first.

The body of Pete Clayton was left in charge of two men, and then the others prepared to leave. Raceline, Albert, Coon and Hickens went as prisoners. The last named person had heard no part of this conversation, and at a word from Mother Hubbard he was kept at the rear.

The journey toward Upper Pocket was begun.

Jaguar Joe and Roema went side by side. Both had an idea that a revelation was at hand, but the girl had not seriously considered the declaration that she was not Abe Albert's daughter. Joe, however, after a word with Jones, became unusually thoughtful.

He was contented, however. Roema was rescued unharmed, and over his shoulder he carried the precious mail-bag. Though he had once lost it, he had now won the right to guard it.

Of the prisoners, Hickens and Albert seemed down-hearted; Coon was calm, and Raceline jested with his captors. He had played and lost; nothing could check his exuberant spirits while life remained.

They found Upper Pocket excited, but there were no fighters there to oppose them. The

men were caged at Lower Pocket. The women were bitter and frightened, but they were harmless, and no one thought of harming them.

Mother Hubbard led the way to Nick Hickens's house. To the surprise of all, she produced a key and opened the door. A bitter exclamation from the rear of the party, where Nick was, indicated that he had made a discovery, but what it was he did not say.

They entered. Mother Hubbard easily found a lamp and obtained a light. Then she opened an inner door. They saw a bed-chamber, and in a chair sat an old man whom the greater part of them recognized as Rodley. He started up at sight of them, his movements showing weakness, but Mother Hubbard led Russell quickly forward.

"Perhaps you two men know each other," she said.

"Harry!"

"Mr. Rodley!"

The exclamations were almost simultaneous, and the two clasped hands.

"Then you are really here, Harry," continued Rodley.

"Yes, but I am surprised to see you. I did not—"

"It's a wonder you do see him," interrupted Mother Hubbard. "That precious rascal, Abe Albert, hired a fellow to decoy the old gentleman into the hills and kill him. Ben did the decoying all right, and he tried the killing game, too. He used a revolver and Rodley fell, but it was from alarm. Just then something like a ghost swooped down upon Ben. He gave one yell and fled, and hasn't been seen since. The ghost was I, and I took Mr. Rodley here. His nervous system was severely shaken, and he needed care, but he will be all right soon."

"That is a fact," added Rodley, "and I suspect the time has now come when you will reveal your identity."

"So it has," replied Mother Hubbard; and she threw off her cloak and huge bonnet.

"Fiends alive! I thought so!" muttered Hickens.

"Mrs. Hickens!" exclaimed Sheriff Jones.

"Eunice Orton!" added Rodley, in surprise.

"You here?"

"Yes, Eunice Orton, otherwise Mrs. Green, alias Mrs. Nick Hickens. Yonder man ought to be remembered by you, though he was never well known where you lived. His real name is Ralph Green."

It was Hickens to whom she alluded, and that man looked at her in a murderous way.

"I am all bewildered," said Rodley.

"You ought to be able to see light. Look at this girl!"

"I see her, but—but—"

"She is Isabel Eastman's child."

"But I thought that child was a boy."

"You were deceived; that's all. She is the child of your second wife, by her first husband. The babe was stolen when only a few hours old, by tramps. What their object was, I don't know; revenge for some small affront, perhaps. When Mrs. Eastman became your wife, a year later, Abe Albert and I were your servants. Your wife caught Albert in a petty theft and you discharged him. For that he hated her. Soon after, through the aid of Ralph Green, to whom I was then engaged, Albert learned where Mabel Eastman, the child, was, and he adopted her. His object was to rear her as unprincipled as himself, but he has grandly failed. I did not know all this for years; I did not even suspect it when I married Ralph Green. Now, the truth is out. Ralph Green, your dark looks will neither harm nor frighten me."

"And my wife's child is—is—" said Rodley, looking eagerly at Roema.

"This girl, known as Abe Albert's daughter. Green, who was with the tramps when she was stolen, knows the truth."

Rodley put out his arms to Roema.

"My dear child, come to me," he said, tenderly. "I was drawn to you from the first; thank Heaven for this meeting! I cannot restore you to your mother, for she died five years ago, but for her sake I will love you as though you were my own daughter. Unlike the way of romances, you are not even an heiress. I have four children of my own, and am not rich, but my protection shall be over you. But here is another claimant, honest Harry Russell. Your father was an Englishman, and Harry was his friend—"

"His servant," interrupted Russell. "Use no fine words, Mr. Rodley. I was his servant, and I am not ashamed of the fact. I will be the servant of my master's daughter, too, if she will allow it."

And Harry respectfully kissed Roema's hand. Rodley had turned away. He saw a troubled look on Jaguar Joe's face.

"Are you afraid you will lose Roema?" the old man asked, smiling.

"This affair elevates her above my level—"

"Wrong! We are all common people, Joe. She is not a long-lost princess nor heiress, but she does come of an honest family. I feel sure I can say as much for you. Be of good cheer; I like your style, and so, I think, does Roema. But Eunice, or Mrs. Hickens, why have you masqueraded in your uncouth role of Mother Hubbard?"

"It was the only way to avoid detection, I was so well known here, and I felt that I must help the girl. Her troubles are now over, I trust."

"Yes, but, by Jewbillikens A. B. Cheesewax, ourn ain't," said Sheriff Jones. "The red roar o' battle is soundin' at Lower Pocket, an' I reckon ther sooner we git thar, ther better it will be. Upper Pocket is in jail, whar it ought ter be, but it'll need ther hull on us ter hold ther line steady."

"We will go at once," said Rodley. "This happy event gives me new strength, and I will try to heal this factional quarrel. My own mission is ended. Harry Russell and I got an insight to the disappearance of the girl—only we thought the child a boy—and we have been half over the West to find her. Our work is done."

"One word," said Simon Coon, stepping forward. "You lost some valuable papers when in the stage, I believe."

"Ye-es."

"I was the one who took them. I played a double role then. When I was supposed to be lying on the ground with a broken head, I was really helping go through you. I was the one who got your papers—they were written in cipher, were they not?—and for liberty I will surrender them to you."

"My dear man," said Rodley, "your plan is a charming one. Thank you for your confession, but, as Roema is now found, the papers are not worth a straw. Your offer is respectfully declined."

Mr. Coon fell back, heaved a deep sigh, and seemed to grow ten years older.

Back at Lower Pocket.

Sheriff Jones and his friends held the drop. The men of Upper Pocket were in jail, and they could not get out until permission was given. Mr. Rodley, however, took the field at once and talked reason to both parties. He proved to be of a rare diplomatic nature, and under his efforts peace was established between the rival villages without bloodshed. Each faction was made to see that it was wisest and best, and though old feelings might rankle, peace reigned thereafter on the surface.

Nearly all the rioters were pardoned.

Of the others, Raceline escaped and was seen no more at Barrel Gulch; Abe Albert and Nick Hickens had a fight in jail and were both killed; Simon Coon went to prison, and Krieg and "Ben," alias "Billy Goat," disappeared. The latter had escaped from the landlord on the way to prison.

The two towns of Barrel Gulch waxed prosperous, became one, and called their common name Rodley, for the man who had led them out of the woods of folly. And ex-Sheriff Jones was the first mayor.

Rodley went East to his family, but Harry Russell remained at Barrel Gulch as Roema's guardian. Ultimately, too, he married the widow of Nick Hickens, whose queer ways were only seen when she figured as Mother Hubbard.

Russell for some time kept the white hat he wore when Abe Albert struck him down, but it was not a pleasant souvenir, and was finally consigned to the flames.

Last of all we rerer to Jaguar Joe. He drove the Mountain Gap stage a year, and then, when Russell had seen that he was honest, enterprising and wide-awake, he produced a few hundred dollars which he had saved up and took him as a partner in a new store at Lower Pocket. Over the door now glitters the sign:

"RUSSELL & LEONARD."

A fitting end for this record may be found in the fact that, the other day, Roema became Mrs. Joe Leonard, and in the peaceful town of Rodley they are happy.

The demoralizing element has succumbed; the stage now rolls peacefully through the Giant's Throat; and Barrel Gulch is beginning to be known outside of its own narrow neighborhood.

THE END.

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BEADLE AND ADAMS, Publishers,
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